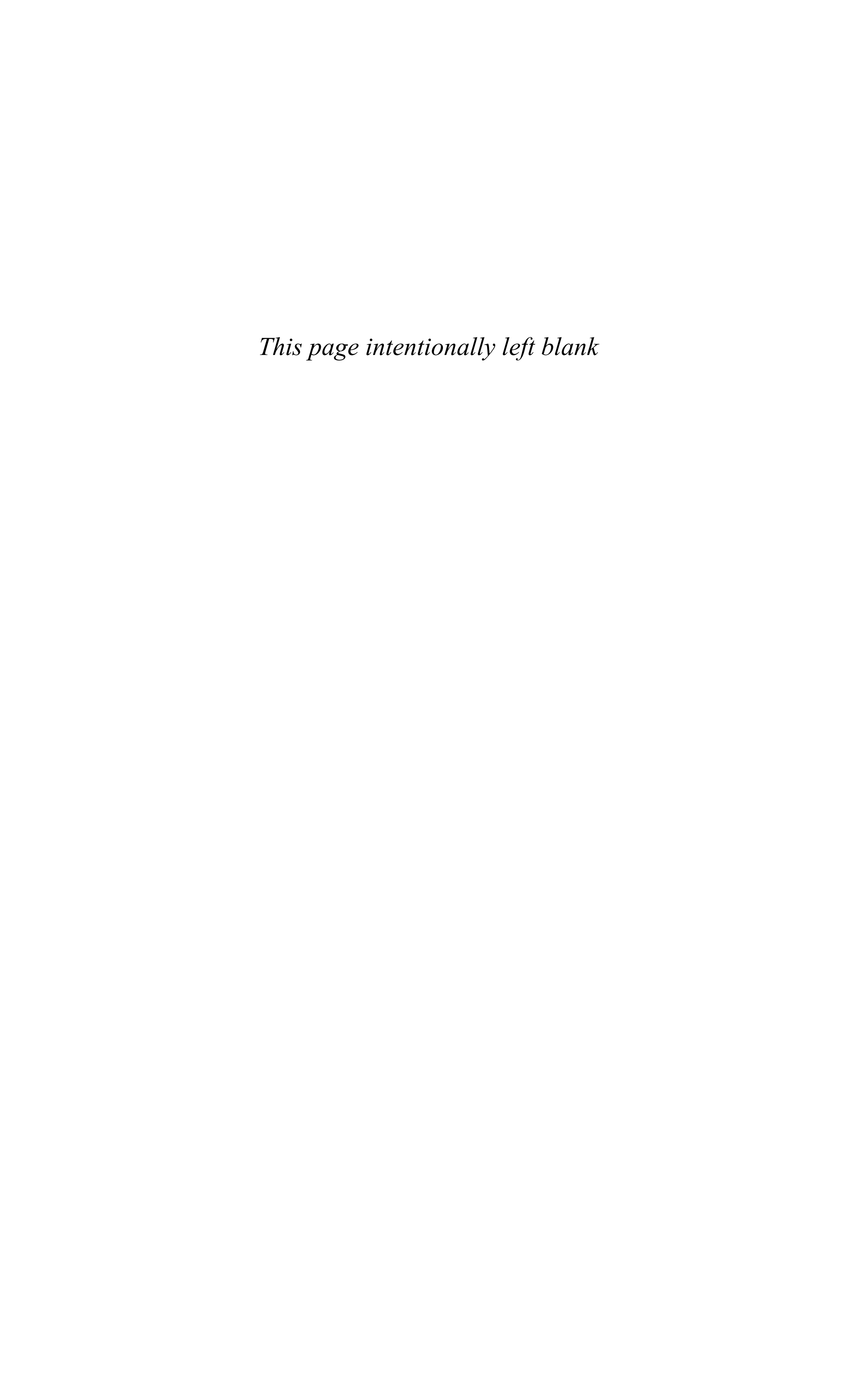
DAVID, SAUL, & GOD

REDISCOVERING AN ANCIENT STORY

PAUL BORGMAN



David, Saul, and God



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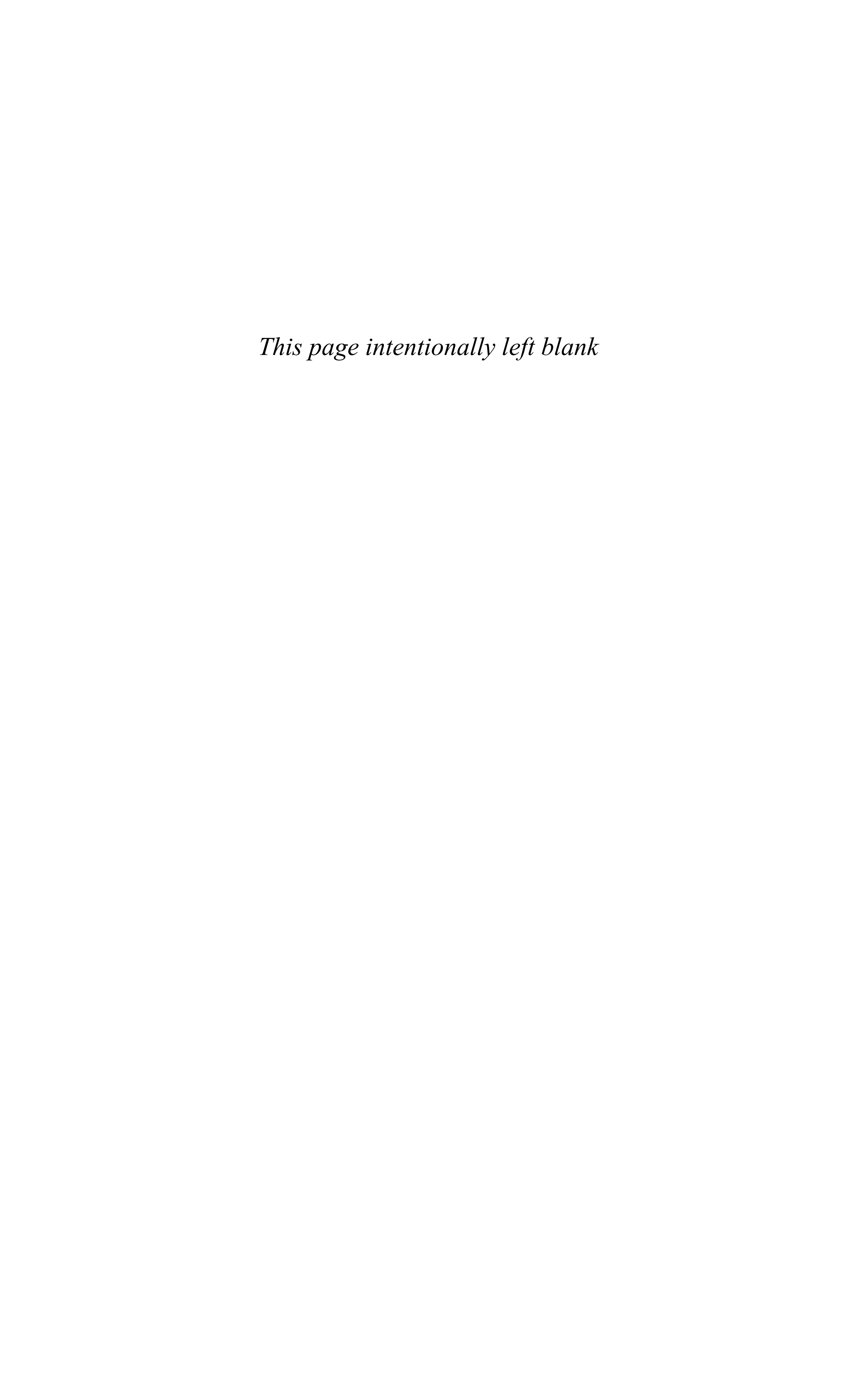
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And finally I think of all those in the past decades who have been absorbed in the study of Samuel and the David story, those whose work informed, while providing me such a lively and good springboard for my own narrative analysis.


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Preface

Rediscover the story of David? Surely the narrative in Samuel and 1 Kings 1–2 has been understood well enough, especially given the prodigious activity within the field of biblical studies over the past two centuries. The truth, however, is that the story of David has suffered from what Hans Frei has called "the eclipse of biblical narrative"—the overlooking of biblical texts as whole and coherent dramas. With rare exception, what has been lost is what Frei thinks of as essential in understanding any narrative creation, namely, an operating assumption that "meaning and narrative shape bear significantly on each other."[1] To rediscover David's story is to retrieve meaning that would have emerged, for the ancient audience, from the narrative shape of a story informed in large measure by techniques of repetition appropriate to an oral age of storytelling. They heard the story. To gain access to this story, as readers, we will pay special attention to the broad patterns of repetition from which emerge the meaning of characters, action, and implicit moral vision.

Along the way, by way of footnotes, we will be carrying on a conversation with other readers representing various disciplines of inquiry.

The David story took final shape from within an oral culture whose techniques of repetition demanded from the audience a circling backward—a tracking of key echoes—as the plot unfolds. Rediscovery of this arguably greatest of all ancient stories, then, involves a recognition of a narrative shape peculiar to its storytelling manner.

Moshe Garsiel and Herbert H. Klement are among the few who have understood the narrative shaping that yields meaning for David's story. Robert Alter[2] and Meir Sternberg[3] offer examples of various techniques of repetition, but without applying these to the broad contours of any given book-length story as a whole and unified drama; J. P. Fokkelman's four-volume study of the David story is a fastidious guide to such patterns of repetition, but on a microstructural level.[4] Garsiel's title suggests the point about broad patterns: *The First Book of Samuel: A Literary Study of Comparative Structures, Analogies and Parallels*.[5] Herbert Klement offers in the context of patterns within the whole story a fine analysis of the story's concluding chiasm, demonstrating nicely the way major patterns interact with each other, weaving together key aspects of the entire story.[6] My exploration traces twelve interlocking patterns. Pattern guides appear at the end of the appropriate chapters.

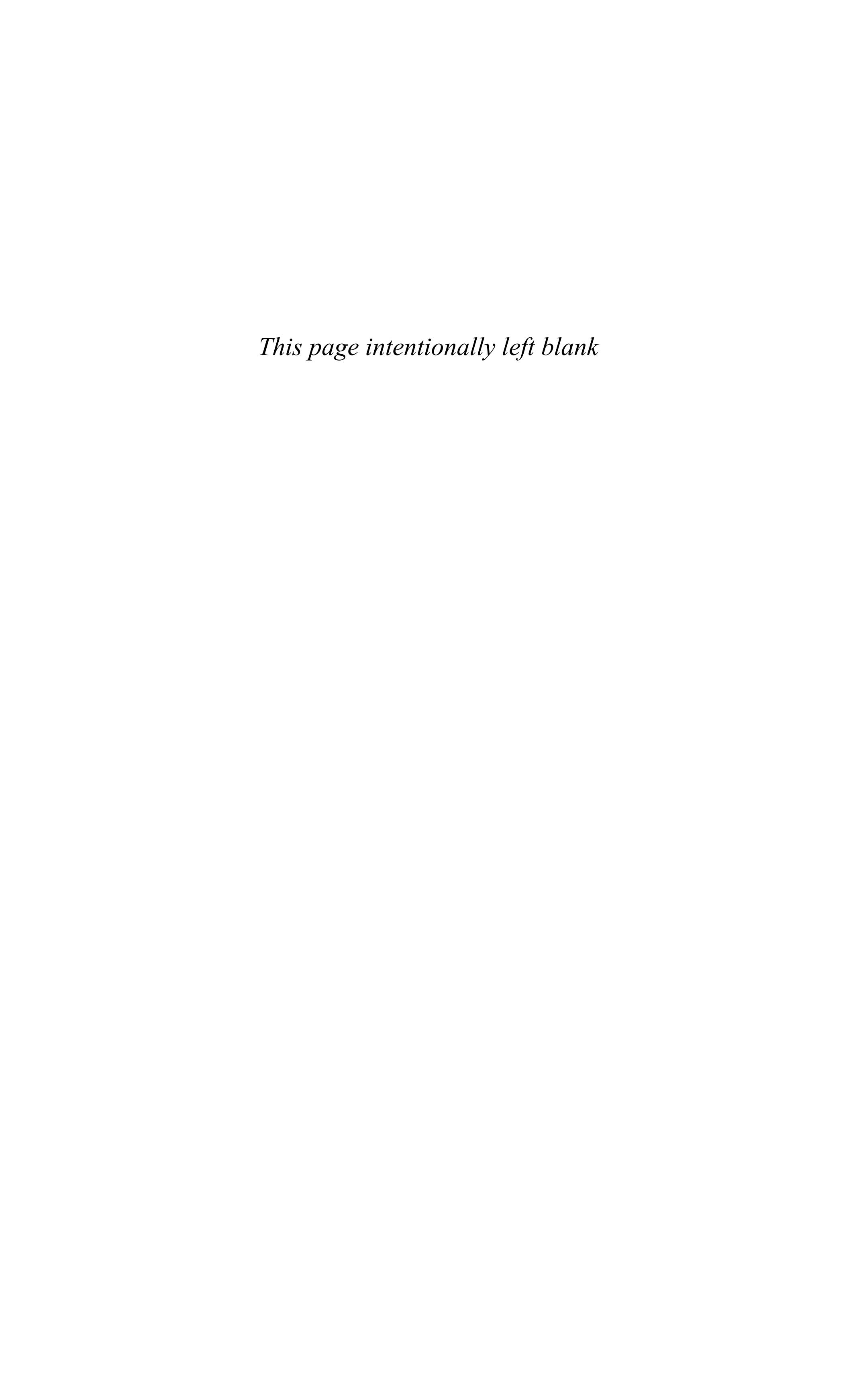
"The architectural cohesion of the narrative from the birth of Samuel to the death of David," Robert Alter suggests, "has been made increasingly clear by the innovative literary commentary of the past two decades."[7] Referring to comments by Alter about the unity and coherence of David's story, Walter Brueggemann opines that "Alter may be correct on this point, but he has only asserted the matter and has not given it any careful analysis."[8] This study will demonstrate the aptness of Alter's assessment of the David story, while helping to answer Brueggemann's challenge.

This reading of an ancient masterpiece is based on terms established by the text itself: a plot working in concert with interlocking patterns of repetition, common to the ancient storyteller. Such storytelling technique keeps the audience circling backward while moving forward, attentive to hearing-clues that cohere and yield meaning.

We will be exploring a story, beginning with Saul, that exhibits not only "architectur[al] cohesion" but a haunting power to engage its audience, a compelling quality unparalleled in ancient literature.

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Introduction

Solving the Story's Mystery of David—and God, and Saul

"Who is David?" asks a wealthy and churlish landowner, Nabal, in a belittling manner (I Samuel 25:2).[1]

"Whose son is this man?" asks Israel's first king, Saul, as David goes out to fight Goliath—in spite of the narrative fact that David has already been introduced to Saul, lineage and all; in fact, the troubled king has been soothed by the boy's music in the royal quarters (I, 17:55).[2]

"Whose son are you, young man?" Saul asks again, of David directly, after David has defeated Goliath (I, 17:58).

"Who am I, O Lord God?" asks David later in the story, after Saul's death and his own rise to power: "who am I . . . that you have brought me this far?" (II, 7:18).

Rediscovering the Questions, Finding the Answers

Uncovering and solving this story's implicit questions—and explicit, as above—depends on close attention to the dozen or so broad patterns of repetition governing the narrative's progress. The ancient storyteller relied on techniques of repetition geared for skilled listeners, and within these various kinds of repetition were discovered the story's embedded meaning, its mysteries of character, action, and moral vision. We, however, read. Rediscovering the story of David

requires "an audience, its ears tuned aright," as Everett Fox puts it in his introduction to an important translation of the David story.[3]

The story's modern audience often misses answers to the central questions driving the drama of David's story because the text is read in a straightforward manner, rather than in the circular way demanded by the ancient text's dependence on patterns of repetition. That is, recognizing a developing pattern requires a remembering of what has gone before, a circling-back action of the mind.

Memory and attention are required, especially for a print-oriented audience. When the oral traditions were put into writing, the storytelling—with or without scroll—would be a live performance for a collective audience.[4] "The normal method of reading [ancient literature, including Scripture] was reading aloud," as Birger Gerhardsson and so many others have observed; furthermore, ancient literatures like this David story "were not intended to be read and heard with half one's mind or to be skimmed through, but were to be read and listened to, time and time again, with attention and reflection."[5]

Rediscovery of this story, then, will be accomplished by recognizing the broad patterns of repetition that drive the action and define character. Each chapter of this study explores one or two such patterns, "comparative structures, analogies, and parallels," as Moshe Garsiel calls them; these patterns demand an unmodern-like way of reading, a moving backward by way of tracing "echoes" even while moving forward with the story action.[6] That is, we will accommodate ourselves to the ancient storyteller for whom, as Walter Ong has pointed out, "thought [came] into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antitheses. . . . Serious thought [was] intertwined with memory systems."[7] The compensation for our listening deficiencies as readers will be a focus on the interlocking patterns of repetition that yield this story's unique, coherent, and compelling unity.

Toward Solving the Story's Mystery of King David and God

That the narrative mystery of David—and God—is central to the story is recognized by many readers. Robert Polzin, for example, notes that "One of the most persistent themes in the last half of 1 Samuel is Saul's seeking after David. . . . [T]his quest for the life of David mirrors the reader's quest for the identity of David and for a key that will unlock the mystery surrounding God's favorite."[8] David's story is filled with suspenseful and surprising action, but the questions of character loom, driving much of what we think of as plot. David and God are at the center of this drama, murky characters both.[9] Saul is

more clear, but fraught with strange depths while eliciting from God dramatically contrasting responses.

David appears so contradictory in action, so hidden in motive: how can this protagonist, so puzzling, kept under wraps by the reliable narrator for so long, serve as Israel's ideal monarch?[10]

Early on we witness God's changing of mind from Saul in favor of David. There emerges in the portrayal of Saul a fatal weakness of character, suggested in patterns of multiple anointings and paralleled wrongdoings (chapter 1, patterns 1 and 2). As a foil for David, Saul serves implicitly as a significant introduction to David, to whom the audience is introduced by way of multiple and conflicting portraits (chapter 2, pattern 3). The answer about who David is, and why David instead of Saul, is initially hidden from mortal view, audience included. God, we are told, can see what humankind cannot: it is only God who has found in David "a man after [God's] own heart"—someone, as Samuel informs Saul, "who is better than you" (I Samuel 13:14; 15:28). On what basis? We find out, finally. At that point, of course, we discover as well something of the nature of a God whose heart was moved by David. Coming to know David helps to explain God, insofar as this is the particular mortal whom God found suitable—after one divine misstep—for a certain purpose. And this purpose comes into clearer and clearer view, a purpose that alone describes the unchanging about God: steadfast loyalty toward Israel's well-being. God changes the divine mind in this story, but not about this.

Who can see into God's heart to understand what God has found that so delights the divine self about David? God is free to change the divine mind, is free to choose: but with what rationale does God do so?[11] To the extent that the story is concerned with uncovering the character of this man after God's own heart—including how it is that David is "better" than Saul—to that extent the audience will come to understand God's heart, the divine will, the divine way. To the extent that we are kept from knowing David's heart, initially, so, too, are we kept from knowing what God is thinking.[12]

But it takes a long narrative while, and our patient attention, to discover the reason for God's choice of David—of who David actually is. He seems infinitely worse than Saul, not "a better man," as God tells Samuel. The worse-but-better of David's wrongdoing, for example, extends most seriously to his obsessive love of sons; this wrongdoing cannot be assessed without recognizing an entire pattern of failed fathers, beginning with Eli and his sons (chapters 6 and 7, patterns 8 and 9). So bad is the father's response to sons that one, Absalom, becomes traitorous.

David chooses to leave the ark behind in his flight from Absalom. Here we have the fourth instance of a pattern in which the ark figures significantly, with

repeating details like the plights of women. The significance of David's responses to the ark, and finally to his son Absalom, are easily diminished or missed entirely without the reader's recognition of the ark pattern, begun in late Judges, in which the ark is completely ineffectual—followed by the loss of this ark to the enemy, but then David's retrieval of the same (chapter 5, pattern 7). Within each broad pattern and in their interweaving with each other, then, are defining clues of what makes David a mystery, but also what unfolds as a resolution to that mystery.

Or this: David's sparing of enemy Saul in parallel accounts that "sandwich" a third sparing of an enemy (though David comes close to killing), a pattern toward the end of I Samuel that yields crucial insight into a David who becomes, from this point on but ever so slowly, less mysterious (chapter 3, pattern 4).

Only by taking careful note of such patterns can the audience come to any clarity about the character of David. As suggested, each of this study's nine chapters covers one or two such broad patterns that determine the dramatic shape and meaning of the narrative.

So why is David kept such a mystery for such a long narrative time? At one level, the answer to who David is appears quite simple: Israel's second king is known in the Hebrew Scriptures as the ideal king by whose standard all kings in the nearly five-hundred-year history of monarchy in Israel are to be judged.[13] But within the major telling of this story (I and II Samuel—I Kings 1–2), David's character remains hidden. The question about who David *really* is emerges as a corollary to the mystery of who God is, or at least who God is relative to divine initiative, response, and thinking vis-à-vis Israel and its leadership. To solve the mystery of David is to better understand the mind of God, as represented in this narrative.

Kings, God, and the Mysterious Drama of Wills

David's story is the longest and most important chapter in Israel's story as a united kingdom, a history recounted in the Books of Samuel and Kings, and retold in the Book of Chronicles.[14] David's story has an introduction of sorts at the end of Judges, "when there was no king in Israel"—an age at the tail end of a failed system of charismatic judges when "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg. 19:1, 21:25).[15] Books I and II Samuel tell the story of how Israel, and then God, come to adopt the rule of kings. God becomes fiercely loyal to the idea of such rule, even if not at first very pleased with the prospect. The biblical record of this change from judges to kings is

very different from what we have come to expect from modern historical texts. Based on decades and perhaps centuries of orally repeated legends and various stages of editing, the text as we have it represents perhaps the most sophisticated and compelling stories of the ancient world; these longer biblical narratives are most often misread as something less than coherent and unified dramas.[16] Included is a deft contrast and tension between great and poor leadership, between David and Saul—both seriously flawed, but only one tragically so. "The story of David," Robert Alter notes, "cannot be separated from the story of the man he displaces, Saul."[17]

Though the final (canonical) form of the text presents itself as history told from within a dominating religious perspective and purpose, this story is no simple tract. King David's story captures a complex interplay not only among human characters at personal and political levels but also between humans and God. The deity of this story allows humans a free range of choices while remaining insistently present in the unfolding action: here is a God with very decided ideas, will, and choice making. The clash or melding of human and divine wills add an extraordinarily complex dimension of drama to the already intriguing interaction among human beings. For example: God chooses Saul as Israel's first king; Saul chooses poorly; God unchooses Saul in favor of "a better man" who chooses well and chooses poorly but emerges as superior to Saul—with God responding to David appropriately. Just why or how David is superior to Saul is what the story promises to disclose—which is to afford a glimpse into the divine way of seeing, knowing, deciding.

That Saul is not constituted psychically or spiritually to be a king is pointed out in cumulative fashion by way of various patterns of repetition, like the ongoing contrast between David and Saul—their respective management of fear and differing uses of sword and spear (second half of I Samuel; chapter 4, patterns 5 and 6). But young David is a surprise choice from the very start, a surprise even to the one character who shouldn't have been puzzled, the prophet Samuel: the seer—like the audience, initially—can't see what God sees (I, 16:7). As the story brings to light what has remained hidden about David, so, too, the story brings to light what has been kept hidden about God's choosing of the mystery man.

The greatness of this story is its pressing toward the resolution of this double-ended mystery of character, God's and David's. As surely as plot complications find their resolution, so, too, is the narrative puzzle of character ultimately solved. Reading the text closely gives the lie to common assumptions, which I will examine, regarding the ultimate or essential ambiguity and mystery of David's character, of God's character, and of the drama that unfolds between centers of will both divine and human.

For the original audience, the stakes were high in hearing well the story being told: in the enigmatic but finally understood David lies Israel's hope. As the Book of Kings goes on to insist, it is only in understanding and returning to the ideality of David-the-king that Israel will find the antidote to its faring so very poorly—the destruction of its northern kingdom, and the languishing of its southern kingdom in Babylonian exile.[18]

The Story Comes to Be: Multiple Davids, Varying Sources, and the Final Writer

In the multiple introductions to David, the audience is put on alert by the narrator regarding such differences about David as to suggest two or three different Davids, each of whom alternates throughout the text toward a final harmony of person (chapter 2, pattern 3). What are we to make of this youngest of eight sons in our first introduction to him; here is a mere lad out in the pastures, seemingly forgotten by his own father and undervalued by the seer Samuel. What inner workings—essential character—is the seer incapable of seeing?[19] How can there be the two contrasting introductions which follow: a quietly responsive boy whose music soothes a troubled king alongside a man of many words who conquers Israel's nemesis, the giant Goliath? Who is this pious giant-slayer and what is the nature of his God-devotedness, given the narrative insistence on David's snooping around to see what the reward would be for killing Goliath?[20] *Who is this David?*—a concluding question asked by a king who has already gotten the answer in a prior introduction, who has already committed his love to the young man.

In the effort to make sense of such multiple and often conflicting textual sequences like these four introductions to David, biblical scholars have been helping us for decades by pursuing the history of separate sources and their respective social and religious settings. Such historical quest, helpful to the literary enterprise,[21] is not able by its method of inquiry to answer the question of what the final writer made of various sources in weaving together a coherent and compelling narrative. Only close attention to the text can confirm, for example, whether and how the multiple introductions of David function to further plot, theme, and character.

Coherence and unity are a complex matter for such ancient storytelling. As already mentioned, patterns of David's story unfold and intersect with other patterns, establishing character while pushing the plot forward. Consider the Goliath vignette, above, an episode that is within what I call the introductions-pattern but also is the harbinger of a more encompassing pattern of episodes

depicting David's simultaneous piety and political maneuvering. Does such political calculation as David's seeking to marry into the king's family cancel out his ostensible God-devotion and obvious courage in killing Goliath? Within a later pattern of responding to death news (chapter 7), David will emerge more clearly as simultaneously a political maverick *and* pious worshiper.

Or perhaps, as some scholars argue, the text is self-defeating in its presentation of a literary David too good to be true (the "historical" David behind the story must have been quite bad); contrariwise, perhaps—as still other scholars argue—the literary David is so consistently cynical and underhanded as to be a powerful though subtle exemplar of disastrous Israelite monarchy (the "historical" David behind the story could not be much worse than what the story presents).[22] Such positions prove questionable if we look closely at the text as we have it. What I will be insisting on, always, is the vital narrative context for this ancient literature with its interlocking patterns of repetition.

From the beginning of the story to its choreographed resolution, the text invites its audience to explore specific tensions and possible contradictions about David, or within him: apparently self-interested politician and pious worshiper; fierce warrior and accomplished musician; a king of justice and an adulterous murderer; an admitted sinner and self-proclaimed blameless one; brash, smooth-tongued talker and extraordinary listener; ruthless executioner and great weeper; fine administrator of people and terrible father (until finally he learns—and saves the nation).

Let us suppose that the text is, in fact, an ambiguous or awkward stitching together of different sources and occasional contradictions: to the extent that inconsistencies are the rule, to that extent we have a text rife with uncertain characterizations of God, David, and Saul. This would be an inferior story, a narrative unworthy of literary analysis or serious religious meaning.[23] We can only pay careful attention, checking the hypothesis that this is, in fact, an artistic triumph revealing essential coherence and unity. Tuned to the orchestrated echoings of this text, we will be able to move forward even while circling backward, thereby tracing important clues toward the deciphering of character, action, meaning.

Other Difficulties in Rediscovering the Story, and Our Ideal

Two other impediments in rediscovering the story of David bear mention. One is the likelihood of strongly predisposed readings. Whether religious or nonreligious, our accumulated perceptions or vague impressions can get unwittingly

projected into the biblical storyteller's represented world. We distort because we hear what we were expecting or wanting to hear, an especially dominant problem in the case of religiously oriented narrative and audience (the non-religious reader has an advantage here). Escaping our biases and even the limitations of critical approaches is finally impossible, though becoming aware of them helps in a most worthy goal: trying to hear the voice of this or any great piece of literature.

Another problem with such an ancient text is our sense of one sequence bumping into the next with no explanatory transition (the biblical narrator rarely offers such)—a sense of choppiness sometimes due to unexplained jumps in narrative time and place. At one point, we move from David's return to Jerusalem, having defeated the forces of son Absalom, back to a prior sin of Saul that has caused three years of famine—a problem David has to solve (II, 20, 21). When was this sin of Saul's? His death has already been reported, a long narrative time ago. The modern reader may experience consternation, whereas the intended audience would have recognized the beginning of a clarifying coda, a chiastic pattern of repetition that helps make sense of the entire narrative.[24]

My approach to the story of David envisions an ideal never completely reachable, but one worth striving for: the objective hearing of the text's own voice as heard by its intended audience, a hearing that explores the story's coherence and unity. The literary critic assumes this unity, and the possibility of discovering something of the text's shape and meaning. Reflecting on various literary approaches to the text, Robert Alter summarizes the big picture of David's story as recounted in I and II Samuel and continuing into I Kings 1 and 2:

> The story of David is probably the greatest single narrative representation in antiquity of a human life evolving by slow stages through time, shaped and altered by the pressures of political life, public institutions, family, the impulses of body and spirit, the eventual sad decay of the flesh. . . . The architectonic cohesion of the narrative from the birth of Samuel to the death of David has been made increasingly clear by the innovative literary commentary of the past two decades.[25]

Well, perhaps: "Alter may be correct on this point, but he has only asserted the matter and has not given it any careful analysis."[26] As suggested in the preface, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann points to the need of demonstration.

What this study provides is just such careful analysis as Brueggemann calls for, an exploration based on terms established by the text itself: plot working in

concert with interlocking patterns that keep the audience circling backward while simultaneously moving forward. We will be entering a story, beginning with Saul, that exhibits not only "architectonic cohesion" but a haunting power to engage its audience, a compelling quality unparalleled in ancient literature.

Rediscovering the Story: Other Approaches, Other Findings

I conclude, now, with a brief addendum for those readers interested in the other representative approaches and views concerning the question of who David is. Such a brief overview will help to anticipate much of the scholarly dialogue conducted by way of notes in the chapters ahead, as well as defining more sharply my own literary approach and sense of the story's meanings. I offer, finally, a summary of my own approach by way of companion critics.

The Traditional Biblical Scholar and the Literary Critic

Biblical studies over the past century-plus of scholarship—continuing up to the present—have focused on a history (and appropriate translation) of textual variants, and/or identifying various traditions and their cultic settings that comprise the sources of the canonical text. Leonhard Rost notes that "the finest work of Hebrew narrative art" is represented in discrete sequences within the David story—smaller stories complete in themselves, like the ark narrative, the succession narrative, the Abiathar sequence, and so on.[27]

The text's final form as an integrated whole, however, was relegated to the scholarly sidelines until the last decades of the 20th century, in the U.S.A. [28] This literary approach has so influenced the field of traditional biblical scholarship as to effect a significant change in the exegetical method of even the most reputable biblical commentaries.[29] Jan-Wim Wesselius observes, nicely, the possible synergy between traditional biblical scholarship and literary criticism.[30]

Bruce Birch's introduction to the David story in *The New Interpreters Bible* perfectly expresses the assumption of the literary critic:

> The emphasis of this work will be on the final form of 1 and 2 Samuel as a literary witness whose integrity and meaning do not depend on analysis and recovery of the earlier sources and editions that have brought the narrative to its present final form. . . . The long process by which these traditions have been shaped is not recoverable. My analysis will begin with the whole rather than the parts. Where earlier

> sources and editions have been left visible, I will comment on the emphases of these elements as they contribute to an enriched understanding of the books of Samuel in their present final form.[31]

Joel Rosenberg, in Alter and Kermode's *Literary Guide to the Bible,* echoes the same sort of departure as Birch, an approach that partially informs the method of my exploration in the chapters ahead.[32]

From a literary point of view, detecting varying sources emphasizes the extraordinary talent of the writer in composing a final edition that appears as a unified whole. Such a task is wonderfully demonstrated—though Alter might say not entirely well—by the David story, what Alter himself calls "composite artistry."[33]

Albert De Pury suggests, like many, a succession of sources for the David story: from an early essentially pro-monarchy perspective to a later final edition that focuses on the need for Israel's faithfulness to God and leader.[34] The literary critic will want to see if we find in David's story the perspectives of each presumed stage of writing in artful harmony, an integrity that supports a sense of the story as whole and essentially unified.

Beginning in the late 1900's, literary critics have undertaken interpretive explorations of the narrative text that focus on *how* the story discloses its *what,* its meaning—how meaning itself is embedded within the story's shape. How are the various characters depicted, eliciting our approval or our disapproval, our hope or our fears? How are they shown interacting to bring about promised resolution to initial conflict, questions, or tensions? These are fundamental questions of interest to the literary critic. In a literary approach to biblical narrative, God is a character whose intention and action hugely complicate the narrative stage. The divine is portrayed as entering into the drama of conflicting human will, respecting and working with human choice.

David Gunn and Walter Brueggemann: The Hazards of a Hybrid Approach

Two leading representatives of traditional biblical scholarship who have adopted aspects of the literary approach in their solving of the mystery of David's character are David Gunn and Walter Brueggemann. Reading the text as a whole literary creation, Gunn determines that God's peevish jealousy made Saul a pawn to fate, an unlucky king, while on the other hand an arbitrary and inexplicable divine favoritism makes David a lucky fellow. For his part, Brueggemann finds David not so unitary as to declare him "lucky": no, the character of David is so self-contradictory as to make God inscrutable and David

unknowable. In each case, I find a lack of patience in viewing the story holistically on its own terms, its interlocking patterns.

Gunn recognizes as well as any the story's central question regarding David the mystery man, and how it might be that Saul fits into this drama. His answer regarding mystery, however, reduces questions to an equation: David is good when he gives, but bad when he takes—an insight that goes far but finally ignores too much of the text.[35] "David is a *favorite* of Yahweh," Gunn goes on to suggest: "for David, Yahweh is 'Providence'; for Saul, Yahweh is 'Fate.' "[36] Things turn out the way they do not through God's choosing, David's choosing, or Saul's choosing but because "fate deals to David the right cards, the wrong ones to Saul." Then Gunn backtracks a bit, allowing God (not "fate") a bit of choice—though of a rather nasty sort: Saul "falls victim to Yahweh's resentment at an imagined insult [Israel's choice of a king over God] and becomes the pawn . . . in a process . . . whereby Yahweh vindicates his shift of attitude towards the monarchy and buttresses his shaken self-esteem."[37] Conclusion? In this story, God has esteem problems, making Saul pure victim: "The mainspring of Saul's failure, then, is depicted as the out-working of fate—fate which is, in some hidden way, the reflection of the will of Yahweh."[38] This inscrutable will of God qualifies as "fate," blind and unpleasant chance.

All of this, of course, makes God quite arbitrary—and worse. "If we are to condemn Saul for his jealous persecution of David," Gunn asks, "how much more is Yahweh to be condemned for his jealous persecution of Saul!"[39] Having offered such a bold assessment of this story's God, Gunn seems to reverse himself with the offer of an inscrutable God: "The thematic statement is plain. Good and evil come from God. He makes smooth the path of some; the path of others he strews with obstacles. He has his favorites; he has his victims. The reasons, if reasons exist, lie hidden in the obscurity of God's own being. Saul is one of God's victims."[40] God's being, then, is "obscure," the divine motive "hidden." On the other hand, Gunn seems sure of God's motives: God is "to be condemned for his jealous persecution of Saul."

Brueggemann proposes a "polyvalent truth" about an inscrutable David—and about an inscrutable God as well. Assuming a scholarly opinion that I and II Samuel is a story told by different authors and never fully integrated by a skilled writer, Brueggemann finds a David who is self-contradictory. The presumed authors behind our final version of the story present two different characters: good David X, we might say (up to the kingdom-consolidated point), and bad David Y for the rest of the narrative.[41] "The [final] storyteller intends us never to know for sure" who David is. In fact, Brueggemann asserts, it is "indeed likely the [final] storyteller does not always know either."[42]

Is this, then, an inferior story, a confused montage of tales, insights, and split personalities that finally does not hang together in any compelling narrative fashion? With such a view of David—and of David's God—we have a muddle, not a mystery. "The person of David is inscrutable," Brueggemann concludes.[43] This judgment renders God inscrutable as well. A narrative that fails to explain why its most important character, God, favors and supports the story's lead protagonist, David, is a failed narrative. There are competing truths, Brueggemann suggests. Such "polyvalent truth" may serve as acceptable to a theologian for whom divine inscrutability and mysterious divine human interaction are proof of divine sovereignty.[44] But for a literary critic attempting to determine a narrative's consistency of purpose and character, such conclusions as this—or Gunn's shrug-of-the-shoulder *David is lucky, Saul unlucky*—indicate a quite inferior narrative. I propose to demonstrate the brilliance of this story's coherence and meaning by focusing on that which holds the narrative together, its interlocking patterns of repetition.

Baruch Halpern and Steven McKenzie: Historical Hypotheses

Gunn and Brueggemann are traditional biblical scholars using aspects of literary discipline to explore the story's conclusions *as story*. Readers like Baruch Halpern and Steven McKenzie, on the other hand, are traditional biblical scholars who assume that the story—the final form of the story—reveals an actual history at variance with that story. The story, that is, works against itself, a sort of spontaneous deconstruction—with the help of the literary sleuth. Both Halpern and McKenzie try to demonstrate from the story as we have it what they take to be an obvious gloss of David's character. Such an enterprise is valid, of course, but can only work if the story as a unified whole is understood as such in the first place.

Halpern determines that the story as we have it poses as unified, but is actually a rather awkward affair of trying to blend an A source with a B source. Halpern's purpose is to identify these contrasting sources in order to find evidence of literary cover-up. "David's agenda [was], as we shall see, systematically to root out Saul's family."[45] Behind the "brilliantly literary creation [of David] in Samuel" emerges "a flesh-and-blood man . . . the opposite of the David of Samuel. He is the anti-David or, by implication, the anti-Messiah."[46] The possibility lacking in Halpern's analysis is a sense of how the presumed distinction between sources might have been used by a final author to create one organically whole story all the more compelling because of the resolution of textual strain. For example: David hides from Saul by taking refuge with Israel's enemies, about which a B source is quite frank, Halpern says; but "the A source

is much more touchy on the subject and denies that David ever served Israel's arch enemies."[47] The David story, I will argue, deftly shows that in serving the enemy, David is actually serving Israel, a possibility that Halpern's approach—interested in identifying two sources in tension—will invariably overlook. At a gullible enemy's expense, David serves the cause of God's people with craft and guile.

Paralleling Halpern's literary method and historical goal, McKenzie notes that "scholars have long observed the apologetic tone of the History of David's Rise," and goes on to list what we moderns can determine about the real David of history on the basis of literary exaggeration and gloss: (1) David sought to advance himself as king at Saul's expense. (2) David was a deserter. (3) David was an outlaw. (4) David was a Philistine mercenary. (5) David murdered Nabal and seized his wife, Abigail, and his property. (6) David was implicated in Saul's death. (7) David was implicated in Abner's death. (8) David was implicated in Ishbaal's death. (9) David annihilated Saul's heirs when he took the throne. (10) David had his own sons murdered to preserve his place on the throne.[48]

What is most troubling about such an approach, beyond what appears random hazarding of opinion, is McKenzie's underlying assumption that the analogue of how-all-kings-operate can serve us well in understanding the particularity of David. The genius of all great literature is precisely its capacity to render the unique individuality of a character, someone who is like but crucially unlike anyone else. David is to be distinguished from other rulers of his historical period: herein lies the true mystery of David, his striking similarity but difference from Saul and from Hebrew kings that follow him.[49]

Robert Polzin: The Story Doesn't Mean What It Seems To, Mostly

Both Halpern and McKenzie agree, on the basis of a presumed literary gloss, that the story's David is too good to be true, and therefore the historical David must have been very bad. Literary critic Robert Polzin, however, finds a quite bad David within the literary text itself, a character explicitly, implicitly—and consistently—condemned by the writer. This would be a rhetorical tour de force, if Polzin is correct, demonstrating from the text a king so frequently-tyrannical—an example to Israel of just how bad monarchy can get, while Halpern and McKenzie can argue, on the other hand, that the story presents a king too good to be true, an obvious gloss.

Polzin suggests a final writer who, taking multiple "drafts," insists on a subtle but consistent undermining of anything good about David for the rhetorical "purpose [of] turn[ing] an exilic Israel away from a centuries-old

glorification of kingship."[50] I will have frequent recourse in the study ahead to the insights and problems of various readings of the David story, including those of Polzin, Halpern, and McKenzie.

Conclusion

Opposed to the aforementioned negative or ambivalent views of David's portrayed character, my exploration will show the warrant for the ideal of David affirmed in the Book of Kings. My insistence, as already mentioned, will be on viewing overarching and interlocking patterns as the definitive context for determining meaning.

Several other critics have begun such work. Adele Berlin identifies "a principle of hermeneutics in the new literary exegesis" employed by those literary critics who proceed by way of "comparison of characters, plot structures, specific terms, and the like."[51] In particular, she cites J. P. Fokkelman, to whom I will be referring, and Yair Zakovitch. The latter "has called attention to mirror-image stories—instances in which one story reflects another, often with some type of reversal [which is] a technique of characterization for a character in a structurally or thematically similar story."[52] I have already mentioned Moshe Garsiel, whose subtitle summarizes what it is that Berlin identifies and what I have identified in prior work with biblical narrative: "Comparative Structures, Analogies, and Parallels."[53] Robert Alter has done a bit of work with a more limited version of Garsiel's "comparative structures," dubbed "type scenes."[54] I have already referred to the very fine work of Herbert Klement on the David story. A portion of his title reads "Context, Structure and Meaning": Klement makes good on an insistence that from careful observation of interlocking patterns, meaning emerges.

With careful attention to repetitions of thematic material—patterns that interlock and overlap—we will find in the biblical text a David whose range of emotion, motivation, and deed for better, for worse, and for better still. The characterization of David suggests a unique and complex individual, a most unusual king. David represents an ancient ideal that contrasts sharply with Homeric heroes, as we see in the Conclusion.

As the mystery surrounding David diminishes, the surprise of who David is becomes greater and his human depth clearer. Answers about David shed further light on God's change of mind in choosing David over Saul and, in general, on the workings of divine decision-making.

1

Saul: Three Anointings, Two Wrongdoings, One Good Son Between

Patterns 1 and 2

Israel's second king, David, will commit what looks like far greater wrong than anything done by God's first choice, King Saul. But David proves much the superior leader. Why might God have given up so quickly on Saul, and what does this intimate about God's reversal of choices in favor of David? Possible answers begin to emerge with the narrator's presentation of Saul's three anointings and paralleled wrongdoing, the latter sandwiching a picture of Jonathan, who is everything good that Saul isn't. With Saul we find an anatomy of failure that goes beyond mere wrongdoing. Something within Saul is tragically lacking, a flaw that will prove definitive as a contrast with David. Brought into a unifying vision by this and other patterns are blocks of material considered quite disparate by many biblical scholars.[1]

Why monarchy in Israel at all, a state of affairs about which the prophet Samuel and even God are shown to be ambivalent, if not downright negative? Israel's need for a king is at the very least implied by the narrator in words that frame an episode of rape and carnage unrivaled anywhere in the Hebrew Scriptures for its horror: "there was no king in Israel."[2] The scene of intertribal warfare and treachery at the end of Judges leads directly to the dilemma of *still no king* in the beginning of I Samuel. A prophet, Samuel, will finally anoint Saul as Israel's first king, a king chosen by God in accord with the people's wishes.[3]

Under Samuel, Israel enjoys a brief respite from communal ill. Sacrifices of communal well-being are celebrated by Samuel throughout the land.[4] But after Samuel? "When Samuel became old, he made his sons judges over Israel," a dynastic move unknown in Israel and boding evil, since "his sons did not follow in his ways, but turned aside after gain; they took bribes and perverted justice" (I, 8:1–3).[5] The story has already told of Eli's two evil priest-sons and the related loss of Israel's ark, and so the elders' request for a king seems quite reasonable.[6] As already indicated, the reliable narrator insists that life under the judges, when "there was no king in Israel," had become an absolute horror, a time when "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg. 21:25). However reluctantly, God agrees with the people's request and selects Saul as Israel's king (I, 8:4–9). Taken in broad narrative context, then, Israel's request for a king and God's ultimate augmentation of the request appears supported by the text.[7]

David, Saul, and God: the story of David cannot be rehearsed without coming to an understanding, provided by the story itself, of the dynamic among these three protagonists. In this story, not one of the three can be understood in isolation from the other two.

Saul's story cannot be separated from David's story. God's first choice of Saul proves a complex foil for God's second try, David. Understanding the narrative contrast between Saul and David provides a window on the initiating and responding nature of this story's God.[8] By noting what is missing from Saul's character, we are better prepared for what God might be looking for in King Saul's replacement. The question *Why David, not Saul?* begins to be answered in the initial portrayals of Saul. From differing traditions regarding Saul, our writer has achieved an integrity of design, a unified narrative account that fits expertly into the larger story of David and God.[9]

Pattern 1: Saul Becomes King, Three Times

1. Private Anointing: Saul, Hesitant (I Sam. 9:1–10:16)

In our first introduction to the divine choice of a king, we are told that Saul is "a handsome young man. There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; he stood head and shoulders above everyone else" (I, 9:2).[10]

The king-to-be has been sent by his father to retrieve some of his father's lost asses. The search goes poorly. "Let us turn back," he says to a

servant boy, “or my father will stop worrying about the donkeys and worry about us” (I, 9:5).

The servant boy isn’t so sure that Saul is on the right track. Why don’t we ask “the man of God” in the neighboring town, the lad ventures; surely the prophet can help with a matter of lost asses (I, 9:6).

“But if we go,” Saul responds, “what can we bring the man? For the bread in our sacks is gone, and there is no present to bring to the man of God. What have we?” (I, 9:7) There is extreme worry in the repeated stutter-like demurrals: *But our sacks are empty; but we have no present; but what have we?*

“The boy answered Saul again . . .” With the master’s servant there is possibility; with the master, there is hesitancy and doubt. The servant lad’s solution for a gift to the man of God is silver produced from his own pocket.

Saul’s first entrance onto the narrative stage reveals uncertainty. Saul’s worry about his father’s possible worry is contrasted by the narrative insistence on a mere lad’s presence of mind and forge-ahead demeanor. Saul is anxious about having nothing to present to the man of God, an understandable concern if it were not for the narrator’s repeated emphasis on the resourcefulness of the servant boy.

Approaching town, Saul and his servant meet some girls, and ask the whereabouts of the seer. The interlocutors are presented as unusually talkative girls, particularly in light of this story’s economy of detail and dialogue. Are we to understand these young women to be struck by the imposingly tall and handsome young man? Is the audience to wonder about what appears striking but otherwise proves deficient? In any case, the girls’ answer turns out to be, simply, that Samuel is in town offering sacrifices (I, 9:11–13).

Advised by God, Samuel then encounters Saul and assures him that the asses are accounted for; furthermore, the prophet says, “all Israel’s desire [is] fixed” on you, and “on all your ancestral house” (I, 9:17–20). What originally might have been two discrete sources for this story—Saul in search of lost asses, Saul anointed by Samuel—becomes in the hands of the final writer a seamless and intriguing introduction to both Saul and his journey to kingship.[11] A question lingers: what kind of king has God chosen? Nothing seems to recommend Saul so far, except his external appearance.

Saul responds to Samuel, “I am only a Benjaminite, from the least of the tribes of Israel, and my family is the humblest of all the families of the tribe of Benjamin. Why then have you spoken to me in this way? (I, 9: 21) Saul may be properly deferential (others chosen by God have expressed themselves similarly)[12]—or he may be fearful. Saul’s family is wealthy, if not mighty.

Linked with the prior hesitancies of Saul as exposed in his exchanges with the servant boy, Saul's rejoinder to Samuel can sound less like proper humility than an expression of deep-seated anxiety—which we find out, in a moment, characterizes Saul's self-estimate.

At dawn, Saul is anointed king by Samuel in private and sent away with a promise that, with "prophetic frenzy," he will "be turned into a different person"(I, 10:5–6).

"You shall go down to Gilgal ahead of me," says Samuel; "then I will come down to you to present burnt offerings and offer sacrifices of well-being. Seven days you shall wait, until I come to you and show you what you shall do" (I, 10:6–8). Neither the narrator nor Samuel offers any explanation of this Gilgal instruction, though the audience's curiosity will be rewarded in a crucial narrative development to come. Perhaps the narrator intends this Gilgal word to strike us as peculiar, so lacking in narrative context, as to rouse our interest and even suspicion: will Saul's being "turned into a different person" lead to an appropriate waiting at Gilgal? Is there a suspicion that something will go wrong with Saul's waiting? After all, the audience has been apprised that, at least to some extent, the Saul presented so far is hesitant and un-leader-like. In any case, for now, God gives Saul "another heart" as he turns to leave Samuel (I, 10:6, 9).

Saul returns home and tells his uncle about the asses being found. "But about the matter of the kingship, of which Samuel had spoken, he did not tell him anything" (I, 10:14–16). Why has the narrator, normally so spare with information, insisted on offering this note of Saul's saying nothing about his anointing? Are we to wonder: is Saul merely being modest, or is he feeling overwhelmed and anxious?

2. Public Anointing: Saul, Hiding (1 Sam. 10:17–27a)

Immediately after Saul's arrival home from the private anointing, Samuel summons the people of Israel. He shames them for rejecting God in their desire for a king, but then proceeds with the public drawing of lots, which indicates "once again"—as Hertzberg nicely observes—a cue for the story's audience in "discern[ing] the Lord's will to fall in with the wishes of the people" (I, 10:17–20). God comes to support Israel's desire for a king.[13]

To whom will the lot fall—who will be Israel's first king? The story's audience shares the secret with Saul and Samuel because of the prior anointing of Saul, in private. All in Israel, including Saul presumably, await the verdict. The lot-drawing narrows down to Saul.

But he is not present! Although Samuel has told him that he is God's choice as ruler over Israel, Saul excludes himself from the lot-drawing among all the tribes gathered (I, 10:1). Why has he neglected to join in? Is Saul the only one of all the Israelites absent because he has known the purpose of this occasion?

The Israelites go about searching for their king-to-be. No one can find him. The people inquire of the Lord, who finally divulges the truth: "he has hidden himself among the baggage (I, 10:22).

God had already given Saul another heart, presumably something different from the hesitant Saul led by the servant boy. And yet on the occasion of this public declaration of his anointing as king, Saul has determined that the collection of baggage would be a good place to hide. And there was quite a bit of Saul to hide: the narrator makes a point of letting us know, immediately after Saul is found, that "he took his stand among the people [and] he was head and shoulders taller than any of them" (I, 10:23). *See,* says the seer, *see if this one is not obviously superior:* "there is no one like him among all the people" (I, 10:24). The disparity between physical heft and courage is an irony extended later in the story, when God advises Samuel that how God sees things is missing from how humans assess matters.

Left unanswered is the problem of God's choice of Saul in the first place. Perhaps God chose a king who proved deficient as an object lesson to Israel against the advisability of monarchal leanings. Such a possibility is ultimately canceled out by God's complete acquiescence to, and support of, Israel's having a king, though one might argue that God as presented here came to accept the idea—support it completely—only after getting used to it. Whatever the case in why God chose someone unsuited to lead—a question not answered definitively by the text—Israel's first king appears to have a serious flaw. He is hesitant (first anointing) and he hides to avoid something or other—we are not told what—when all the people gather before Samuel (second anointing). How then can Saul be successful as king in leading all the people?.

3. A God-Spirited King—Or Is This a Judge? (1 Sam. 10:27b–11:15)

For a third time we witness Saul becoming king. This time he looks like an old-time judge like Gideon or Samson, rising to an occasion of crisis with charismatic leadership.

Nahash the Ammonite has given the Israelite territory of Jabesh-gilead seven days to capitulate under threat of having everyone's right eye gouged out.[14] The Jabesh elders send messengers throughout Israel's tribes asking for

help. The people of Saul's town weep when hearing the news. Saul "was coming from the field behind the oxen," and is apprised of the dire situation (I, 11:4–6). He becomes angry on behalf of the people of Jabesh-gilead, "and the spirit of God came upon Saul in power" (I, 11:6).

Saul rallies troops and proves victorious. On the way to success, however, Saul had taken a yoke of oxen and cut them in pieces, sending the bloody pieces throughout Israel's tribes with the threat that if they didn't come as troops, their oxen would meet the same fate (I, 11:7). Such bullying tactics, one might assume, were necessary. But an echo is heard of the horrible butchery of a raped-to-death concubine's body, cut into pieces and distributed to the tribes of Israel for precisely the same purpose, to rally the troops (Judg. 19:29–30).

But all seems to work out. Having given Saul another heart, God's spirit now comes to assist. God might be able to work with Saul, after all. After a successful military venture led by Saul, "all the people went to Gilgal, and there they made Saul king before the Lord in Gilgal" (I, 11:15). And so we have come to the third anointing scene, a public coronation and celebration. This is Saul at his best.

The people making Saul their king that day ask that those who hadn't wanted him as king be put to death. Saul refuses, and leads the people in rejoicing. Together with their king and Samuel, Israel offers "sacrifices of well-being before the Lord" (I, 11:15).

The repetition of the celebratory location as Gilgal is a reminder of a challenge left hanging in the story: go to Gilgal, the prophet had told Saul, after the very first anointing; wait for me seven days to perform the sacrifices. This scenario has not yet unfolded.

Of the three anointing scenarios, this last presents the promise of Saul. Has Saul's heart been changed, permanently, so that he is no longer the fearful person we encountered in the first two anointings? Saul's possibly impermanent condition of heart is one question, but there is a larger issue. What we see here is a reminder for the audience of the failed age of judges, a tradition of strong-leader-for-the-occasion—a judge as needed. Here, before all Israel, the judge-like Saul becomes king. How will it work out (judge-as-leader never did)? The first two stories of Saul's anointing, along with this hint of judge-like days, do not bode well for the buried question of this third anointing. In addition, this third anointing is the only one that emphasizes the people's initiative in the declaration—or reaffirmation—of Saul as king (I, 11:14–15): is the people's trust in judge-like prowess a sufficient guide to what makes a good king? The story's audience would be aware that "the spirit of God [who] came upon Saul in power" can leave, as in the case of the charismatically successful judge Samson (Judg. 16:20).

Any lingering doubt about Saul's self-destructive fearfulness, and his resulting failure as leader, is removed with paralleled wrongdoings and Saul's responses.

Pattern 2: Saul Does Wrong and Responds Poorly, Twice

Immediately following Saul's third anointing scene and preceding his significant wrongdoing, Samuel regales the people about the nature of wrongdoing, both their own and the king's (I, 12:1–17).

At the beginning of his diatribe, Samuel had commended his own behavior, hinting that although Saul had just been celebrated as king, the two sons of Samuel himself, the prophet-judge, were still available to lead the people (I, 12:2). But the people had already balked at the rule of these sons, asking instead for a king: after all, Samuel's elevation of his sons as judges had already been disastrous. The two sons "turned aside after grain; they took bribes and perverted justice" (I, 8:3). As suggested, echoes of Eli's two sacrilegious and manifestly evil sons have helped to suggest, before Saul enters the scene, that the people's request for a king has some merit, in spite of their desire to have a king "like other nations" (I, 8:5). In spite of: *to be like other nations* flies in the face of prior narrative emphasis on Israel's being set apart from other nations. And yet God will get fully on board with Israel's having a king, working diligently with David to bring communal well-being to Israel's twelve tribes, so often locked in bloody conflict with each other.

Samuel links the people's present request, with petulant tone, to Israel's many past misdeeds. Rather then mention what the audience knows to be true, that God at the very least backs the shift to monarchy in Israel (instructing Samuel, first, and then disclosing the hiding place of God-anointed Saul during the lot-drawing for king), Samuel attributes to himself the responsibility for listening to the people's desire for a king.

However self-interested this speech, Samuel offers sound hope: "if both you and the king who reigns over you will follow the Lord your God, it will be well. . . . But if you still do wickedly, you shall be swept away, both you and your king" (I, 12:14; 24–25).

Immediately we find the new king doing wrong, and being "swept away" by God. One may wonder why this sweeping-away, this dismissal, is so peremptory. But the prior glimpses of Saul's hesitancy and fear shed some light on the question. And a second, quite similar instance of wrongdoing apparently seals the case against Saul.

1. Premature Sacrificing (I Sam 9:11–10:9; 13:3–15)

At the conclusion of the first anointing of Saul as king, Samuel had instructed Saul to go ahead of him to Gilgal. Wait seven days, Samuel says: I will "come down to you to present burnt offerings and sacrifices of well-being" (I, 10:8).

Sometime later we find Saul besieged by the Philistine army, after receiving credit for a victory won by his son Jonathan (more on this later). The king's own men are deserting, hiding "in caves and in holes and in rocks," seeking refuge in "tombs and in cisterns" (I, 13:3–7). Saul has lost control of his troops, quite obviously. He has waited seven days, "the time appointed by Samuel" (we are not told that the eighth day has yet dawned; I, 13:8). The enemy Philistines press in. With "the people [slipping] away from Saul," the king takes measures into his own hands by playing Samuel's priestly role. Saul seeks to ensure success by offering God sacrifices. Having completed the burnt offerings (directed solely toward God), but before the communion sacrifice (a peace banquet for God and the entire community), Saul is suddenly confronted by Samuel.

"What have you done?" Samuel asks Saul.

"When I saw that the people were slipping away from me . . ." Saul begins (I, 13:10–11). He goes on to explain that he had waited for Samuel, but, after the allotted time for the prophet's appearance had run out (or was running out?), he finally "forced himself" to start the sacrifices. Whether the prophet's arrival is *too* late, given the seven-day instruction, we are not told: there is nothing in the text to indicate that the seventh day had ended when Samuel appears, interrupting Saul between the burnt offerings and the communion sacrifice. In any case, the *appointment* of Saul as king has been compromised by Saul's failure to keep the *appointment* with God's word-bearer.[15]

"You have done foolishly," Samuel responds. "Now your kingdom will not continue; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart . . . and appointed him to be ruler over his people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you" (I, 13:11–14).

But just how foolish are Saul's actions? It's the seventh day, after all, and military defeat looms. Where is the prophet? *Perhaps God first wants a little initiative on my part,* Saul might be thinking: *certainly God wants divine recognition here, a sacrifice.*

The audience might be expected to feel sympathy were it not for what the narrative has already established regarding the king's striking fearfulness. Saul's character flaw, it appears, is not so much the wrongdoing, but a habit of the heart—a fear—that leads to the wrongdoing. This is a possibility that the

audience is alerted to in pursing the somewhat enigmatic Saul as the story unfolds. With no servant boy to prompt or guide him in the present scene of impending danger, Saul is on his own, and does poorly: for royalty to assume religiously ritualistic prerogative in battle would set a bad precedent. The original audience was presumably tuned to this danger of collapsing the roles between king and prophet-priest.[16] And his men who flee from their commander, avoiding an upcoming battle: what kind of leader is this king who cannot retain his own troops?

Is Saul seeking to honor God for the sake purely of honoring God, as some think,[17] or is he performing such ritual sacrifice as if it were magic? That God is being used by Saul to control a situation to his own satisfaction and assuagement of fear is made more likely by what transpires throughout the rest of Saul's experience, which concludes with his conjuring up the now-dead Samuel through a spiritual medium—a divination he himself has outlawed (I, 28:9).

Increasingly, Saul looks essentially flawed, at least in his role as king. But Samuel doesn't appear at his best, either. When the prophet finally appears—has he been skulking about, ready to pounce on Saul just before the seventh day is ended?—he asks, simply, "What have you done?" (I, 13:11) The timing of Samuel's appearance seems a bit like entrapment, God's or Samuel's. In any case, Samuel interrupts Saul's sacrificing with disapproval. In not waiting for the prophet, as V. Philips Long notes, Saul fails to act on what Samuel had told him: "God is with you (I, 10:7).[18]

To the question "what have you done?" Saul answers defensively: "When I saw that the people were slipping away from me, and [2] that you did not come with the days appointed, and [3] the Philistines were mustering at Michmash . . ." (I, 13:11). We are being set up for David. God's second choice does wrong, terrible wrong, but his responses to being confronted, as I will show, are as different from Saul's as is possible to imagine.

But still, where is forgiveness, a divine response with which the story's audience would be familiar?[19] And what about that "changed heart" given by God to Saul? Perhaps the audience needs further, more conclusive answers as to the seemingly preemptory unchoosing of Saul by God. We get these answers, quite exhaustively spelled out, in the second instance of Saul's quite similar wrongdoing and response.

2. Inappropriate Sacrificing (1 Sam 15:1–31)

The pattern of Saul's wrongdoing has formal elements: disobedience tinged with fearfulness; wrongful sacrificing; proffered rationale by the wrongdoer;

God's deciding to unchoose Saul in favor of someone presumably superior. Here, the second time around, each of the elements is more pronounced—a confirmation of what might have been open to conjecture.

Samuel had given Saul instructions on behalf of God regarding the seven-day wait at Gilgal, and now the prophet once again gives what he calls divine direction. "The Lord sent me," says Samuel, "to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the Lord" (I, 15:1). God wishes the Amalekites to be put under the ban, says Samuel; they must be wiped out "utterly."[20] We know that God had, in fact, sent Samuel to anoint Saul, and we assume the validity of this present set of directions.[21] Immediately following Samuel's very clear words to Saul, we have the narrator's description of what happened:

> [Saul] took King Agag of the Amalekites alive, but utterly destroyed all the people with the edge of the sword. Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the cattle and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was valuable, and would not utterly destroy them; all that was despised and worthless they utterly destroyed.
>
> The word of the Lord came to Samuel: "I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands."
>
> Samuel was angry; and he cried out to the Lord all night. (I, 15:8–11)

Saul *utterly* destroyed all the people; all that was despised and worthless they *utterly* destroyed. The play on *utterly* suggests that "all" and "utterly" does not add up to "utterly all." In the case of Agag and all that was valuable, Saul and the people *would not utterly destroy them.*

But the calumny is not just the king's: "Saul *and the people* spared Agag . . ." The people are now implicated along with Saul. But more important, King Saul's leadership is compromised by having the people implicated in actions he was supposed to direct, for which he was to take responsibility. What, we may well wonder, is the relationship between leader and led? From the very first, searching for asses, Israel's future leader is being led by his servant boy.

We hear once again, as in the first instance of wrongdoing, that God has changed the divine mind. "The word of the Lord came to Samuel: 'I regret that I made Saul king . . .' "—which makes Samuel cry out in anger before God. The prophet now has vested interests in the king, it would appear.

What has been orchestrated within the narrative as damning detail regarding Saul's deficiency would seem to leave little doubt about God's deci-

sion to revoke the divine choice of Saul. In a corollary way, the story leaves no room for doubt about what qualities will be important for God's better choice to come. To attribute hidden or even sinister motives to God's thinking regarding Saul, as some would have it, appears quite a stretch, given not only the paralleled wrongdoing and poor responses of Saul, but the initial portrayal of someone riddled by fearfulness.[22]

Samuel makes his way to confront Saul. From the mayhem of the battlefield, Saul and his troops have traveled to the religious center at Gilgal to offer sacrifices. As in the first case of Saul's wrongdoing, Samuel arrives at the precise moment between the burnt offering and the communion sacrifice: once again, there will be no festive celebration of communal well-being.

Before Samuel can open his prophetic mouth, Saul is talking: "I have carried out the command of the Lord" (I, 15:13).

"Then what is this bleating of sheep in my ears," Samuel asks, "and the lowing of cattle that I hear?" (I, 15:14)

Saul's fearful rejoinder is to blame the people: "*They* have brought them from the Amalekites; for *the people* spared the best of the sheep and the cattle, to sacrifice to the Lord your God; but the rest *we* have utterly destroyed" (I, 15:15, emphasis mine). *They* did the wrong thing; *we* did the right thing.

"Stop!" Samuel exclaims. Enough!

The prophet continues: "I will tell you what the Lord said to me last night. . . . Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel" (I, 15:16–17). *So act like a king, in spite of your low self-estimate.* Here we find a narrative dagger to the character of Saul, an exposure of his tragic flaw, his fear about his own standing, his worth.

Samuel goes on, "Why . . . did you not obey the voice of the Lord? Why did you swoop down on the spoil, and do what was evil in the sight of the Lord?" (I, 15:17–19)

Saul is not through defending himself and his actions. "I have obeyed the voice of the Lord, I have gone on the mission on which the Lord sent me, I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have utterly destroyed the Amalekites." How's this? Haven't we already gone over this territory? An inveterate equivocator, it turns out, Saul persists in repeating himself: "But from the spoil the people took sheep and cattle, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the Lord your God in Gilgal" (I, 15:20–21).

The bizarre nature of Saul's defensiveness is left to the sidelines in what Samuel says next, an essential truth that is independent of issues like low self-esteem and overweening pride. The lines play off each other in poetic resonance:

> Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices
> as in obeying the voice of the Lord?
> Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice;
> to heed, than the fat of rams.
> For rebellion is no less a sin than divination,
> and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry.
> Because you have rejected the word of the Lord,
> he has also rejected you from being king. (I, 15:22–23)

Saul gets it, finally—or so it seems at first. "I have sinned," he acknowledges. Further, Saul seems to have come to an understanding of his essential character flaw, a fearful following of those he is supposed to lead: "I have transgressed the commandment of the Lord and your words, *because I feared the people* and obeyed their voice" (I, 15:24; emphasis mine). Samuel has faulted Saul for not obeying the voice of the Lord, while Saul confesses his problem of obeying the voice of the people rather than God's voice. He seems to be coming to a modicum of clarity about his deficiency, though apparently not aware of its seriousness, as we see in what follows.

Even as he asks forgiveness, Saul asks for precisely that which has been the core of his problem. To his confession of fearing the people he adds this plea: "Now therefore, I pray, pardon my sin, and return with me, so that I may worship the Lord" (I, 15:25). Cloaked as a request for Samuel to take him back for purposes of worship, Saul is asking for reinstatement of himself before God and good standing before the people. "It would have been Samuel's function to offer the sacrifice," Robert Alter notes. "For Samuel not to accompany Saul to the altar would be a manifest public humiliation."[23]

"I will not return with you," responds Samuel; "for you have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel" (I, 15:26).

Still Saul clings, literally—and pathetically. "As Samuel turned to go away, Saul caught hold of the hem of his robe, and it tore. And Samuel said to him, 'The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this very day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you' " (I, 15:27–28). The word-play with *tear* is exquisite and meaningful: the prophet's robe torn by a fearfully clutching Saul epitomizes perfectly what it is about Saul that presumably moves God to have the kingdom of Israel torn from Saul.

Still Saul clings, anxious for at least of shred of respect before his people. "I have sinned," Saul repeats—"yet honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, so that I may worship the Lord

your God" (I, 15:30). As James Nohrnberg notes, "Saul begs Samuel to keep his disgrace a secret, and Samuel accedes to keeping up the appearance of Samuel's support for Saul."[24]

Concern for one's standing before people is hardly compatible with genuine repentance, though many biblical scholars assume Saul's repentance here to be quite genuine, free of complicating and equivocating issues of status seeking.[25] The text accumulates incriminating detail against Saul, and against any lingering hope of Saul's success as king, culminating here:

- Saul said to Samuel, "I have sinned . . . because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. Now therefore, I pray, pardon my sin, and return with me, so that I may worship the Lord [and retain standing]" (I, 15:24–25).
- Then Saul said, "I have sinned; yet honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, so that I may worship the Lord your God" (I, 15:30).

Saul's initial plea of "return with me so that I may worship the Lord" is repeated by the second plea, which makes the implicit request for standing in the first confession quite clear: "I have sinned; yet honor me now before the elders of my people and before Israel, and return with me, so that I may worship the Lord your God."

Bound in with what appears at first glance a quite genuine expression of repentance turns out to be no true willingness to turn around at all: Saul still fears the people, still wants honor before the people. Contrary to those views suggesting the genuine repentance of Saul and subsequent unfairness of judgment against the king,[26] the narrative dooms Saul with his own words.

"So Samuel turned back after Saul; and Saul worshiped the Lord"; Saul will apparently retain his standing in the public eye. Samuel's weakness is accentuated in a narrative moment when his grief for Saul is questioned most severely by a God ready to move on (I, 16:1). Samuel may relent, but God doesn't. "I have rejected him from being king over Israel," God has to remind the prophet. In fact, "the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him" (I, 16:14).

Why such harsh divine response? The answer cannot be, as sometimes asserted, that Saul is "fated" to do poorly because of the narrator's ambivalence regarding kingship; nor can there be any ironic reading.[27]

The narrative suggests that the problem is not simply Saul's hopeless fearfulness, his need for standing, but also an anxiety that would manipulate God through religious ritual rather than wait on God for provision. Samuel's

condemnation of Saul suggests the connection between the king's rebellious self-insistence and his attempt to use God:

> For rebellion is no less a sin than divination,
> and stubbornness is like iniquity and idolatry.

Robert Polzin points to this doomed inclination of Saul to usurp or manipulate God's power:

> Saul's gradual descent into sorcery and divination [is] a movement first recognized in the ritual baggage among which Saul fruitlessly hid in chapter 14. His oath of fasting, his frustrated efforts to inquire of the LORD, his casting of lots to seize the culprit, and his preference for doing things "at night" were all indications of Saul's divinizing of acceptable Israelite rituals in an excessive effort to ensure the success of his enterprises.[28]

The narrative makes the implicit connection between Saul's initial fearfulness, leading to rebellion, and his attempts to manipulate God that include recourse to divination.[29]

We find another instance regarding Saul's fearful disposition in a peculiar detail inserted by the storyteller with apparent randomness between Saul's disobediently selective slaughter of the Amalekites and his disobedience involving ritual violation at Gilgal: he stops to build a monument to himself (I, 15:12). "Though you are little in your own eyes," we have seen Samuel counsel the king, "are you not the head of the tribes of Israel?" (I, 15:17) Saul, we have been told, is anything but literally small: this head of the tribes stands "head and shoulders" above his compatriots. One who takes time, midstream as it were, to build a standing tribute to himself may have an interior problem: a severe case of being "little in [his] own eyes." Saul emerges as a fearfully insecure person, one who uses monuments and even God to secure a stable sense of himself and of his significance.[30]

Saul's escalating frenzy of fear and increasingly unstable leadership unfold in his troubled reign ahead, confirming that which the narrator has provided from the very first meeting with Saul where we see a future king whose hesitancy is answered by a confident and can-do servant. This brief episode, the boy as foil to the man, functions in the same way as a longer episode with which we close, a moral tale in which Saul's son serves as foil to his father. What Saul isn't, but should be, is demonstrated in a story sandwiched between the two wrongdoings and the exposure of King Saul as a fearfully clutching leader.

Saul's Doubled Wrongdoing as a Frame for Jonathan, and What Is Right (I Samuel 14:1–52)

What's wrong with Saul is suggested in part by what's right about his son Jonathan. After the three introductory scenarios, Saul begins his reign and immediately—before we hear of any overt wrongdoing on Saul's part—Jonathan does the fighting, defeating a Philistine garrison (I, 13:1–3). But it is Saul who blows the trumpet of triumph. "Let the Hebrews hear!" he shouts. What "all Israel heard" was "that Saul had defeated the garrison" (I, 13:3–4). It would seem that Jonathan has taken the initiative in battle while Saul demands the credit for victory.

The situation immediately deteriorates under Saul's leadership, as we have seen: the Philistines "mustered to fight," and the Israelites gathered by Saul begin scurrying off, badly frightened. They hid "in caves and in holes and in rocks and in tombs and in cisterns," while those remaining with Saul trembled with fear (I, 13:5–7). We are given here a glimpse into the future, including the ubiquitously unfavorable comparison of Saul with David. "The kingship was supposed to be God's instrument for delivering Israel," James Nohrnberg notes, "but Saul dies battling the Philistines whom only David will be strong enough to defeat consistently. David succeeds in delivering the kingship from itself, that is, from the disasters of Saul: delivering it for Israel."[31]

Once again, Jonathan takes the lead against Israel's enemy (I, 14:1), immediately after his father's first wrongdoing. The king's son throws himself and his companion on God's mercy in a daring raid against a foe that vastly outnumbers the Israelite duo. "Come," says Jonathan to his comrade in arms, "let us go over to the garrison of these uncircumcised; it may be that the Lord will act for us; for nothing can hinder the Lord from saving by many or by few" (I, 14:6). Here is an echo, in reverse, of Saul's inaction, fear, and presumption before God. Here, also, is a precursor about what is right about David, epitomized in his encounter with Goliath (see chapter 2).

Jonathan proposes to his companion a scheme indicating clear dependence on God. The two will appear before the enemy. "If they say to us, 'Wait until we come to you, then we will stand still' " and not engage in battle; "but if they say, 'Come up to us,' then we will go up; for the Lord has given them into our hand" (I, 14:9–10).

The enemy does, in fact, say *Come up to us*. And so it is that the Lord has given the answer: Jonathan and his armor-bearer proceed, killing about twenty of the enemy. "There was panic in the camp [of the enemy]" (I, 14:14–15). In the case of Jonathan and a single companion, the enemy panics; just

prior, Saul's troops panic, slinking away. King Saul is not capable of keeping his men from deserting in the face of the assembled enemy, a fact underscored by the example of Jonathan's striking fear into the hearts of his enemy.

This Jonathan interlude functions with deft point to diminish Saul, to indicate a deep-seated flaw within the king's inner person. For example:

- "The Lord gave Israel the victory that day" working with Jonathan—not Saul; Jonathan is recognized by the people as the one "who has accomplished this great victory in Israel" (I, 14:23, 45).
- God makes Israel triumphant *that day;* a verse later, we hear that "Saul committed a very rash act *on that day*" (I, 14:23, 24).

Even to triumph Saul cannot respond well. His deep-seated problem surfaces once again as a fear-based need for revenge, a capacity to ruin even a good thing: eat no food, he demands of his troops, until "I have been avenged on my enemies" (I, 14:24). Until *I* have been avenged?

As a result of the king's foolish and apparently self-serving dictum, the troops grow dangerously faint and end up committing sacrilege by finally succumbing to their hunger. They eat slaughtered sheep and oxen with blood. Saul's rash oath creates a double taboo: violation of the oath itself and of ritual purity by eating meat with blood.

Furthermore, Jonathan himself comes under the curse of his father, unwittingly: he eats honey, is energized—and doomed.

Meanwhile, Saul inquires of God whether to go after the Philistines, and God doesn't answer. *Why not* is what Saul wants to know. The attentive audience has been given important clues about *why not,* but the worst of Saul's poor action is yet to come. The king decides on lots to determine the culprit, the one who has broken the king's oath, the one whose guilt presumably has kept God silent before Saul's plea.

> Saul said, "Come here, all you leaders of the people; and let us find out how this sin has arisen today. For as the Lord lives who saves Israel, even if it is in my son Jonathan, he shall surely die!" But there was no one among all the people who answered him.
>
> He said to all Israel, "You shall be on one side, and I and my son Jonathan will be on the other side."
>
> The people said to Saul, "Do what seems good to you." (I, 14:38–40)

The lot will determine whether someone on the people's side is guilty, or on the other, the father and son's side. Does Saul suspect a hidden guilt such that he subjects himself to the drawing of lots?

Here are the people who are supposed to be led by their king: first, *there was no one among all the people who answered him* when Saul declares that even his son shall die, if guilty of breaking the king's foolish oath. Second, when things progress to the lot-drawing stage, *Do what seems good to you,* the people respond. The lot falls on Jonathan (14:41–42).

If this guilt is in me or in my son Jonathan: the people and the story's audience know that, technically, the guilt of oath-breaking is Jonathan's. But the story's audience presumably recognizes as well that the actual guilt lies with Saul.

> Then Saul said to Jonathan, "Tell me what you have done."
>
> Jonathan told him, "I tasted a little honey with the tip of the staff that was in my hand; here I am, I will die."
>
> Saul said, "God do so to me and more also; you shall surely die, Jonathan!"
>
> Then the people said to Saul, "Shall Jonathan die, who has accomplished this great victory in Israel? Far from it! As the Lord lives, not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground; for he has worked with God today." So the people ransomed Jonathan, and he did not die. Then Saul withdrew from pursuing the Philistines; and the Philistines went to their own place. (I, 14:43–46)

Again: here are the people who are supposed to be led by their king. First they have been silent. Next, *"Do what seems good to you."* The Israelites have had enough, just as God has. From silence and then the one-sentence shrug of the shoulders, the people burst into eloquent assertiveness: "As the Lord lives, not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground; for he has worked with God today."

And so it was that "the people ransomed Jonathan, and he did not die." The king's scheme to detect and kill the offender is properly spurned.

Earlier, when learning about his father's vengeful oath, Jonathan had said, in an understatement so characteristic of biblical narrative, "My father has troubled the land" (I, 14:29). Indeed.

Conclusion

Without noting the developing pattern of Saul's becoming king three times, and his paralleled wrongdoing and response, and the sandwiched Jonathan episode, the nuances of character that establish Saul as hopelessly deficient are missed.[32] The narrator has provided ample detail within telling patterns:

Pattern One: Multiple Anointings of Saul

	1st Anointing (I, 9:1–10:16)	2nd Anointing (I, 10:17–27a)	3rd Anointing (I, 10:27b–11:15)
Physical appearance	"Handsome young man."	"Head and shoulders taller than any [in Israel]."	
Leadership aptitude	*Fearful?*	*Fearful?*	*Charismatic Courage*
	Saul: "Let us turn back." Servant's initiative: "Let's ask man of God." Saul: "But what have we?"	Knowing he is to be ruler, Saul hides from all Israel at the lot-drawing for King.	warrior-like; rallies the people as would a charismatic leader, an old-time judge
The anointing	*Private*	*Public*	*Public*
	Samuel anoints Saul, privately (10:1)	Samuel presents Saul: "Long live the king," shout the people.	"All the people . . . made Saul King before the Lord at Gilgal."
God support?	God gives Saul "another heart."	God has to tell the people of Israel where Saul is hiding.	"The spirit of God came upon Saul in power": people declare Saul King.

Pattern Two: Twice Saul Does Wrong, Responds Poorly

	1st Wrongdoing (I, 9:11–10:9; 13:3–15)	2nd Wrongdoing (I, 15:1–31)
Injunction	Samuel, man of God, to Saul: Go to Gilgal and wait 7 days: I will come to sacrifice . . .	Samuel to Saul: God wants Amalekites to be wiped out "utterly."
Wrongdoing	7th day (not yet 8th): Saul sacrifices (Samuel not there).	Saul and his people spare King Agag and "the best of the cattle . . ."
Confrontation	"What have you done?" Samuel asks. "You have done foolishly. . . ."	(God confronts Samuel: "I regret that I made Saul King.") (Saul tries preventing confrontation: starts talking, excusing himself.) Samuel confronts Saul: you did not obey; you did not listen.
Saul's response	"I saw that the people were slipping away from me . . .. I forced myself, and offered the burnt offering."	"I feared the people . . ." "I have sinned . . . Yet honor me before the elders of my people and before Israel."
Consequences	Samuel: "Your kingdom will not continue; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart . . ."	God to Samuel: "The Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel."

the audience cannot charge God of divine arbitrariness or inscrutability here, or assume for Saul a blind fate (I, 16:7).[33]

What can God do with this divinely chosen Saul—a strange predicament for God to be in? This story's God is so radically free as to view affairs partly of God's own doing and decide to make a change. Saul's final dismissal by God, framed in terms of divine regret over God's own choice, suggests that Saul was a divine experiment that did not work out, as Bruce C. Birch observes.[34] An alert audience has been prepared for God's dismissal of Saul by the repeated instances of his hesitancy and unchecked fearfulness.[35] God's unchoosing of Saul in favor of a better man makes good narrative sense.[36] However much some readers may feel pity for Saul, God's desertion of the divine first choice appears fully justified and not a bit mysterious or random.[37]

Referring to Saul's second wrongdoing, disobeying the prophet's word to destroy all the Amalekites, V. Philips Long refers to a "progressive generalizing of Saul's offence" whereby "the narrator is able to drive home his point that Saul's specific misdeed in chapter 15 is but a symptom of a more deep-seated ill."[38] The second egregious wrongdoing is itself the culmination of a progressive narrative case that indicates, in the early going, a "deep-seated ill" within Saul.

Within the intertwined patterns of Jonathan's achievements and Saul's anointment and wrongdoing, the storyteller assembles overwhelming and damning evidence of an irremediable flaw within Saul.

To Samuel's mortal eye, however much the audience suspects that Saul is to serve as a foil to David, God's unchoosing of Saul is intolerable and God's choice of David not understandable (I, 16:6–7; 15:11). "The story of David," Robert Alter says, "cannot be separated from the story of the man he displaces, Saul."[39] Saul and David: my literary approach assumes a final writer whose skill it is to weave a whole and compelling narrative out of various sources—multiple introductions, for example, to both Saul and David.[40] The four portrayals showing the distinct range of David's character—contradictory aspects of character, one could say, serve to establish expectation for what will unfold about David in the narrative ahead.

2

Who Is David? Multiple Introductions

Pattern 3

David plays more roles, in more situations, than any modern protagonist.

—Lore Segal

After all is said and done, we are still left with Samuel's greatest enigma, the figure of David himself.

—Everett Fox

Who is the creature who pleads with Achish [Philistine king] to go into battle against Saul and Jonathan and then laments for Saul and Jonathan?

—Robert Pinsky

[David's question], "Who am I and what is my house, that thou hast brought me thus far?" nicely summarizes the central question which the entire Davidic history seeks to answer.

—Robert Polzin

"Who is David?"

—The story's Nabal, I Samuel, 25:10

The story's multiple introductions of David, consist of four brilliantly clear vignettes that do not add up to any apparent coherence of

character. The resulting complexity yields a mystery that contrasts sharply with what is an economically achieved clarity of character for Saul.

1. *David, Whom Only God Knows (I, 16.1–13)*
2. *David, Quiescent Musician Known and Loved By Saul (I, 16:14–23)*
3. *David, Talkative Warrior: Pious, Political, and Loved By All (I, 17:1–54)*
4. *Sequel: David, Mystery Man, Suddenly Unknown By Saul (I, 17:55–18:5)*

The first vignette sets the narrative tone: prophet Samuel is sent to anoint David—under the ruse of a sacrifice—but the seer sees wrongly in the selection process. Only God can assess a person accurately, we hear (I, 16:6–7). In the next two vignettes, King Saul meets two very different Davids: a quiescent, responsive David playing his lyre for the troubled king in a private royal chamber and, on a very public stage, a politically ambitious and overtly pious David delivering the king and his people by slaying a giant. Finally, in a fourth introduction, or sequel, a confused Saul asks David about his identity, about whose son he is—in spite of having already met him, loved him, and heard whose son he is. Regarding David, Samuel's early misseeing and Saul's late confusion frame these multiple introductions. They establish the key dramatic role of David's mystery status along with aspects of character that in fact will come to cohere in one unified consciousness—Israel's greatest king. That greatness will become known.

David occupies more narrative space and raises more questions about himself, and about the survival and well-being of Israel, than any other character of the Hebrew Scriptures—and in all of ancient literature.[1] The initial angles of vision prepare the audience for the many faces of David, faces that mask a hidden interior. For much of the story, the narrator keeps a veil over David's true motivations and deepest emotional responses.

The mystery of who David is, insisted on by the narrative, is located narratively in an even larger mystery about God. What has God seen in David that makes him "better" than his predecessor Saul, so much better as to help change God's mind about the divine choice of Saul as king over Israel? About David, God, and to a lesser extent Saul, questions of character will become more complex, but not without some emerging answers: these questions of character drive the story's drama in at least equal measure with the action, the plot.

The stakes for later Israel in discovering the essential David are high: here is the paradigm by which all kings are to be judged. In David lies Israel's hope.[2] But who is he, really?

Introduction 1: David, Whom Only God Knows (1, 16.1–13)

David is to replace Saul, with the prophet-judge-priest Samuel performing a surreptitious anointing.

For reasons made clear within the narrative itself, God has rejected Saul as king. No mention is made of God's rejection of Saul's person, though it becomes evident that Saul himself is unclear about the distinction between his person and his role: he stakes all of his person—his worth—on the royal appointment. God has changed the divine mind about Saul's role as king. Someone has been found, as yet unidentified by the text, whose interior make-up—"heart"—pleases God; Saul gives way, in short, to "a better man" (I, 13:4, 15:28). Samuel is told to go anoint this better man as a replacement for Saul. Never is the timing of when this replacement will take effect mentioned in the text, though it becomes clear that only death will remove Saul from the throne.

Samuel is Saul's confidant, and he is afraid to go behind Saul's back in anointing David, as God has instructed him. "How can I go?" asks Samuel of God. "If Saul hears of it, he will kill me." So God suggests a ruse whereby no one will know what's happening: "Take a heifer with you, and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord'" (I, 16:1–3).

Like God, the king now chosen by God—a man truly after God's own heart—will prove equally adept in matters requiring subterfuge toward good ends. Samuel complies with the divine strategy.

> Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem.
>
> The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, "Do you come peaceably?"
>
> He said, "Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice." And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice. When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord."
>
> But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for *the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.*" . . . Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen any of these." (I, 16:4–10; emphasis mine)

Samuel has to prompt Jesse: "Are all your sons here?" Well, the father responds, "there remains yet the youngest..." Samuel responds: "Get him, for we will not close the circle till he comes here" (I, 16:11).[3]

An afterthought of his father, David is outside the inner family circle, and outside the perfect Hebrew number of seven.[4] Will the closing of the circle, then, have David at its center? This eighth and youngest son is in the fields, tending sheep. Summoned, David appears. "He was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome" (I, 16:12)—and we recall what God has said to the seer Samuel, that mortals see poorly because they look merely on appearances. Only this story's God can see something far more significant than the boy's cheerful good looks.

"Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed [David], surrounded by his brothers" (I, 16:13). The outsider is now encircled by his family—though unknown to them, David is seized on by God: "now the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward" (I, 16:13). The episode ends without a single word or action from David.

We have met David, but not really: we know nothing about him except that God likes him—for good reason, apparently, but reason known only to God (I, 16:7). The mystery of God and David are linked: how God thinks and feels will become most clear when we are most certain about the man who delights the divine heart—which happens by the end of the story.

Introduction 2: David, Quiescent Musician Known and Loved by Saul (I, 16:14–23)

David's second entrance onto the narrative stage, after the disguised anointing by Samuel, brings the king-to-be into the court of the king he is to replace. Saul is feeling perfectly horrible, and David will be for the king a soothing minstrel (I, 16:16). What Saul once knew as "the spirit of the Lord" within him has been so reversed that he now experiences its opposite: "an evil spirit of the Lord tormented him" (I, 10:6, 9; 16:14).

Relief comes, ironically, from the very "neighbor... who is better than [Saul]," one whom Saul does not recognize as his kingly replacement. And one whom Saul loves immediately.

> "I have seen a son of Jesse the Bethlehemite who is skillful in playing [says a servant], a man of valor, a warrior, prudent in speech, and a man of good presence; and the Lord is with him."

> So Saul sent messengers to Jesse, and said, “Send me your son David who is with the sheep.” Jesse took a donkey loaded with bread, a skin of wine, and a kid, and sent them by his son David to Saul. And David came to Saul, and entered his service. Saul loved him greatly, and he became his armor-bearer.
>
> Saul sent to Jesse, saying, “Let David remain in my service, for he has found favor in my sight.” And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him. (1, 16:15–23)

David says nothing, and does nothing except on request. His father had told him to take food and wine to Saul. David does so. Saul requires relief from his terrors, and David responds with soothing music.

This first David Saul meets, then, is quiet, receptive, and musical—a servant responding to solicitation, not a person initiating action or conversation. The quiescence here is almost a passivity, as Robert Polzin notes.[5] This quiescent, receptive, and lyrical David resurfaces often in the story to come—for better and for worse.

But this is not the only David.

Introduction 3: David, Talkative Warrior: Devout, Political, and Loved by All (1, 17:1–54)

Saul meets David once again as if for the first time. David approaches the king with a plan to confront Israel’s enemy. In this and the following introduction of David to Saul, a modern reader encounters what appears to be a confused text, a clear case of the writer honoring various and not necessarily compatible oral traditions of Saul-meeting-David. Noting what the writer accomplishes with such textual givens is an indication of narrative purpose and genius.[6]

Jesse has told his son David to take some food to his brothers, who are fighting the Philistines. Approaching the battlefield, David neglects to perform his lunch-bearing duty. The perfectly compliant and receptive David of the lyre-playing introduction here initiates both talk and action. In lieu of receptivity and quiescent attentions, David appears aggressively interested. David has heard a war cry.

Israel’s troops are daily being taunted by the Philistines in the person of Goliath, a loudmouthed and self-assured giant. With all astir, “David left the

things [brought for his brothers] in charge of the keeper of the baggage, ran to the ranks, and went and greeted his brothers" (I, 17:22). Where is the compliant, quiescent musician-boy?

David overhears the giant's imprecations. He also hears—and makes sure he hears it again, and again—the promise of a reward from Israel's king for anyone who kills Goliath.

> And David heard [the giant]. All the Israelites, when they saw the man, fled from him and were very much afraid. The Israelites said, "Have you seen this man who has come up? Surely he has come up to defy Israel. The king will greatly enrich the man who kills him, and will give him his daughter and make his family free in Israel."
>
> David said to the men who stood by him, "What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine, and takes away the reproach from Israel? For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?"
>
> The people answered him in the same way, "So shall it be done for the man who kills him."
>
> His eldest brother Eliab heard him talking to the men; and Eliab's anger was kindled against David. He said, "Why have you come down? With whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness? I know your presumption and the evil of your heart; for you have come down just to see the battle."
>
> David said, "What have I done now? It was only a question." (I, 17:23–29)

David's oldest brother knows something about David—or thinks he does—that the narrator makes sure the audience becomes aware of: as seen by Eliab, David is presumptuous, pesky. Something about the youngest brother David strikes the older brother as "evil." It is an evil, says the brother, hidden in "your heart." Does Eliab, in addition to God, have access to the interior state of David's thinking and feeling?

What is in David's heart, of course, is precisely the mystery this narrative is presenting. There is history in this interaction: *what have I done NOW?* It would appear that Eliab is onto something, based on prior dealings between brother and brother. It was only a question, says David—only words![7]

The oldest brother's judgment has a ring of truth, particularly in the light of the sibling rivalry recorded so dramatically in the Hebrew Scriptures, especially in Genesis. David's retort will prove to be disingenuous. His "what-have-I-done-now?" jibe receives serious answer from what follows, not only in

the Goliath episode, but on through the larger story. That is, David will prove himself a man of shrewd calculation, though whether such savvy is to his credit or blame remains part of the mystery that makes up the man.

The audience comes to know from the narrative's repetition of David's concern that his nosing about regarding the reward for slaying Goliath is far from the status of "only a question" (I, 17:23–31). David is up to something big for himself (and/or for God?): there are rewards that include marriage into the royal family and presumably the outside chance of ascendancy—should anything happen to the king or his offspring.

We don't know if David has understood that what passed for family sacrifice back there, with the prophet, was actually his anointing as Israel's second king. Presumably a spirit's coming "mightily upon David from that day forward" (I, 16:13) would have been at least a clue that, if only a sacrifice, this was an occurrence of some significance for the boy.

Perhaps in positioning himself to marry into the royal family, he is wittingly or unwittingly in league with God's initiative in anointing him as Israel's next king. How long will the audience be kept in the dark about David, and how much more mystery can be added, or deepened?

David's questioning about the reward for killing Goliath is so insistent as to come to the king's attention:

> When the words that David spoke [about the reward] were heard, they repeated them before Saul; and he sent for him.
>
> David said to Saul, "Let no one's heart fail because of him; your servant will go and fight with this Philistine."
>
> Saul said to David, "You are not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for you are just a boy, and he has been a warrior from his youth." (I, 17:31–33)

David talks bravely and convincingly to the king in this second introductory scene. The king yields. There is no indication that he recognizes David.[8]

Saul presumably is still suffering private torments, and now, public terrors. Both the king and his military are immobilized by fear regarding Goliath. David leaves the royal chambers without the offered warrior gear: it is all too heavy, cumbersome. The would-be warrior, the narrative insists, is a boy, one too small for Saul's armor and spear, or sword.

Goliath is still mouthing curses at Israel and Israel's God as David appears on the scene. He approaches the giant in the name of the Lord (I, 17:45), and with five stones for his sling. The juxtaposition of lyre-playing David with one who fingers stones for destruction is stark.

The militarily inexperienced and unarmored youth, with no weaponry—or so it appears to Goliath—approaches a giant who is dressed like a moving fortress:

> [Goliath] had a helmet of bronze on his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail; the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels of bronze. He had greaves of bronze on his legs and a javelin of bronze slung between his shoulders. The shaft of his spear was like a weaver's beam, and his spear's head weighed six hundred shekels of iron; and his shield-bearer went before him. (I, 17:5–7)

Preceding this one-man army is a shield bearer. David has only a stick, his sling, and five smooth stones.

> [Goliath] looked David up and down. . . . What he saw filled him with scorn, because David was only a lad, with ruddy cheeks and an attractive appearance.
>
> The Philistine said to David, "Am I a dog for you to come after me with sticks?" And the Philistine cursed David by his gods. . . ." Come over here and I will give your flesh to the birds of the air and the wild beasts!" (I Samuel 17:42–44, New Jerusalem Bible [NJB])

David returns the giant's gibes with gusto, mimicking his enemy's phrases with added touches of his own. At each point of taunt, David claims superiority for himself, his people, and his God.

> You come to me with sword, spear, and scimitar, but I come to you in the name of Yahweh Sabaoth, God of the armies of Israel, whom you have challenged. Today Yahweh will deliver you into my hand; I shall kill you, I shall cut off your head; today, I shall give your corpse and the corpses of the Philistine army to the birds of the air and the wild beasts, so that the whole world may know that there is a God in Israel, and this whole assembly know that Yahweh does not give victory by means of sword and spear—for Yahweh is Lord of the battle and he will deliver you into our power. (I, 17:45, 46, NJB)

Goliath has claimed that he will throw David's flesh to the birds and beasts; David responds that he will throw Goliath's corpse *and* all his friends' corpses to the same birds and beasts. Goliath curses David in the name of his Philistine gods; David, facile and ready of speech, curses the giant in the name of *his* god, Yahweh Sabaoth.

What Goliath cannot know is that this boy has, along with this God he claims, what we would call an ace up his sleeve: in the hands of the experienced,

a sling-and-stone is a lethal weapon. The listener might very well recall the story from the horrific last days before there was a king in Israel, told at the end of Judges. The tribe of Benjamin is defending itself against the vastly larger forces of the other tribes. But there is an elite core among the Benjaminites: "of all this force, there were seven hundred picked men who were left-handed; every one could sling a stone at a hair, and not miss" (Judg. 20:16). And so the boy of many words becomes a sure-handed warrior of lethal capacities, stunning the giant with a well-placed stone picked from among five. Then, with the giant's very own sword, David finishes the business, slaying the giant and beheading him (I, 1:48–50).[9]

With God (apparently) and a sure hand, David deals with Israel's nemesis, but not without anticipating the future. While he takes the giant's head to Jerusalem (an anachronism), he keeps the giant's armor for himself, hiding it in his tent (I, 17:54). So ends our third introduction to David. This, too, is David: a talker, and a warrior equipped with God-confidence and extraordinary skill, able to "sling a stone at a hair, and not miss," like the elite forces of the Benjaminites.

The contrast between the two Davids introduced to Saul suggests sharp differences or even contradictions in David's character, but even within this single portrait of the highly energized talker and warrior there is ample indication of opposing tensions. At one end of possibilities, David is self-confident. Selling himself to the king, David had told of wondrous exploits:

> "Whenever a lion or a bear came and took a sheep from the flock,
> I used to follow it up, lay into it and snatch [the sheep] out its
> jaws. If it turned on me, I would seize it by the beard and batter it to
> death" (I, 17:34–35, NJB)

David dwells on details, putting his person and his personal powers in an especially good light. On the other hand—another seeming contradiction—he tells Saul that it was "the Lord who saved me from the [claw] of the lion and from the [claw] of the bear, [who] will save me from the hand of this Philistine" (I, 17:37).[10] David is self-confident and self-promoting; David is God-confident, and God-promoting.

Is it possible that his apparent self-interest somehow coincides with God's interest, that self-confidence is somehow related to God-confidence? Or is there simply a hopeless tension of oppositions, God magically converting into divine purposes the braggadocio and political maneuvering of this boy? To miss the early suggestions of David's complexity within the pattern of multiple introductions is to be at a loss for much of what follows in the story.[11]

This particular David displays initiative of word and daring-do, and will do so throughout the story ahead, for better and for worse.

The two Davids Saul has met couldn't be more different, to be sure: the one David is silent, the other talks; one waits dutifully for a call to actions like carrying lunch to brothers or playing music for the king, the other talks without waiting and acts as if impulsively; the one David is musically gifted, the other militaristically brilliant; one exercises receptivity, the other, initiative. What the text ahead will reveal, in fact, is not the superiority of one David over the other, or any sense that one David does well while the other David tends to make trouble. Rather, we will find an integrity of both Davids in a coherent character whose greatness and wretchedness are spread evenly through all of his person, quiescent and active.

There is the distinguishing but also the melding of David the private man and David the public servant—the quiet lyricist, Israel's talkative warrior supreme. The private and responsive David, lyricist and musician, is alone with the king; the public and initiating David is Israel's champion warrior. The private David will do well, but also poorly; likewise, the public David does very poorly, but also very well.[12]

The story ahead will insist that David's private life is organically a part of his public life—that private does more than just impinge on public, or vice versa.[13] Nonetheless, it will be helpful to maintain the distinctions the pattern of introductions makes here: a more private David who is this-way, and a more public David who is that-way.

Introduction 4: Sequel: David, Mystery Man, Suddenly Unknown by Saul (I, 17:55–18:5)

No narrative sign is given that Saul has recognized or failed to recognize David in the prior introduction. On the other hand, nothing suggests that Saul welcomes this boy, the would-be giant slayer, as one he already knows well, already loves mightily. The narrator delays presenting information that Saul hasn't the faintest idea about David's identity, creating in effect a fourth introduction to David that offers a narrative exclamation point to his mystery—a sequel to the first three introductions of David to the story's audience.

Only after David has taken the giant's armor to his own tent and the giant's head to Jerusalem (the text does not say to Saul) do we discover the king's confusion concerning David's identity (I, 17:54–55). How fitting that, at the end of these narrative sequences of various and wildly divergent introductions, we hear a question about David's identity, set up by the narrator as a flashback, as David left to fight Goliath. "When Saul saw David go out against the Philistine, he said to Abner, the commander of the army, 'Abner, whose son is this young

man?' " (I, 17:55) That Saul should ask, of course, is puzzling. He has already met David, known him as Jesse's son, and asked Jesse for David's services.

In addition, Saul has already loved David mightily and been comforted by him. What biblical scholars note here about varying and inconsistent sources represents a perspective and methodology that does not pretend to answer what would seem to be a most intriguing question: why would the final writer allow the story to be read this way—to be heard in such potentially confusing fashion?

What are we to make, then—what does the narrator want us to make—of Saul's utter befuddlement?

> David took the head of the Philistine and brought it to Jerusalem; but he put his armor in his tent.
>
> When Saul saw David go out against the Philistine, he said to Abner, the commander of the army, "Abner, whose son is this young man?"
>
> Abner said, "As your soul lives, O king, I do not know."
>
> The king said, "Inquire whose son the stripling is." On David's return from killing the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul, with the head of the Philistine in his hand.
>
> Saul said to him, "Whose son are you, young man?"
>
> And David answered, "I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite." When David had finished speaking to Saul, the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David. . . . David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him; as a result, Saul set him over the army. And all the people, even the servants of Saul, approved. (I, 17:54–18:5)

Just who are you, David? "Whose son are you, young man?" The audience has been allowed four introductions to David, with this apt question establishing expectations for the complexity and mystery of character that lies ahead. It is one thing to uncover the question of David's character as a central dramatic focus, but another to find the narrative's answer to that mystery.[14] Who IS David?

Here in the concluding frame, David is loved by all the people, just as in the initial frame we found David approved of by God. Nonetheless, the universal human approval of David is suspect, since we have been told that mortals judge on the basis of appearance, whereas only God can see inside a person. Perhaps Saul's son Jonathan is an exception to what mere mortals can see, his spirit seizing on the true David (spirit to spirit?) just as God saw something in David that made God's spirit seize on David.[15] What are we to make of Jonathan's

response to David? The king's next-in-line for the throne strips himself literally and figuratively of all claims to it, offering to an outsider, David, symbols belonging to royalty (I, 18:3–4)![16] Are we to understand Jonathan's as an attachment to David for all the wrong reasons? Or the opposite, the loyalty of one who truly gets it regarding David, as God does? We are left with questions because that's the way the narrator wants it: this is yet another good question that will bear narrative fruit for our asking it.

Weaving together differing sources, or at least strangely contradictory episodes, the writer accomplishes, as some have seen, an economically intriguing portrait.[17] The power of these narrative introductions is not simply in establishing the centrality of questions, but in suggesting a mystery with dramatic interest and power. The audience is not simply apprised of what to look for, but beckoned into the story as those who must follow the clues if any pleasure is to be realized, any sure resolution reached. To borrow the apt subtitle of Meir Sternberg's fine work, the audience will need to be engaged in "the drama of reading."[18] The audience has a role in completing the story: we must be sleuths, answering Saul's peculiar last question in the epilogue-like conclusion of the multiple introductions: Who are you, David?

Conclusion

To the modern audience, these apparently unconnected introductions of David to King Saul might seem to indicate a senile potentate, a problematic text, and a hopelessly confused picture of the protagonist. In fact, each of the three meetings of David with Saul, along with first anointing-introduction, offer in their artful weaving the promise of a coherent personality, a unified consciousness, an integrated character. Such audacious complexity of possibilities and opposition hints at a confident writer determined to render in David a dramatically unified character. Such an accomplishment would be hard to imagine were the narrative to move with the kind of unified flow modern readers have come to expect from narrative. We circle backward, for example, even while moving forward: the last introduction of David, with all Israel approving, serves as a frame that echoes the first, David approved of by none less than God.

The promise of the introductions will come true, the expectations met: David the initiator can take properly, as in his capture of what will become Jerusalem, or improperly, as in the taking of Bathsheba's body and her husband's life. David the private and responsive musician can be magnificently receptive to the voice of a prophet who condemns him for the Bathsheba and Uriah affair; the same private man can be disastrously swayed by a widow's

voice that dupes him into prolonging and extending a disastrously parochial love of sons. Like Abraham, David will be challenged at the private, familial level, for the sake of a more comprehensive communal weal—to relinquish the ordinary clutching to, and coddling of, offspring.[19] David's journeying, like Abraham's, is most tellingly inward, bringing to fruition a self that he—or the audience—could scarcely have anticipated. David's is a journey toward what he claims, in the last chapters of the story, is "blamelessness before God" (II, 22:24).[20] Preposterous—unless we have missed something keyed for us in the very beginning, in these multiple introductions, namely, that what mortals cannot see, God does. How mortals act and judge does not necessarily reflect how this story's God operates. David is a mystery in this story, as is God; the narrative, through key patterns of repeated sequences, slowly unfolds all matters of character, action, and meaning up through the very end of the story, most especially in the four-chapter chiastic conclusion to Samuel, books I and II—and in a second ending, in I and II Kings.

Many great stories possess the magic of surprising but not entirely unexpected disclosures. David's is one of the most magical of these stories in all of narrative literature. The text represents itself as history: the audience is to understand that this David is real, as in "historical." History, this text insists, is not as smooth as we would like. As Robert Alter notes, narrative techniques employed by these Hebrew writers for the purpose of morally informing history will invariably

> produce a certain indeterminacy of meaning, especially in regard to motive, moral character, and psychology. . . . Meaning, perhaps for the first time in narrative literature, was conceived as a *process,* [a] seeing again, a continual suspension of judgment, weighing of multiple possibilities, brooding over gaps in the information provided.[21]

Slowly this text makes us aware of the limitations of knowing easily a character as complex as David. Or God. The narrative provides a gradual coming to true vision, a coming to see what has been intriguingly hidden: a heart that delighted God before we could know why.

Beyond the mystery of character is the open-ended quality of David's journey. The future appears open to David in a way that is the opposite of the early sealing of Saul's fate. Unlike the initial circumstances surrounding and plaguing the inner person of Saul, nothing explicitly interior or external hedges David in: no commands from God, no challenges from the prophet, no inner compulsions. God gives Saul a different heart; God tells Saul what to do. Concerning David, however, we do not hear of specific directions from

Pattern Three: Multiple Introductions to David

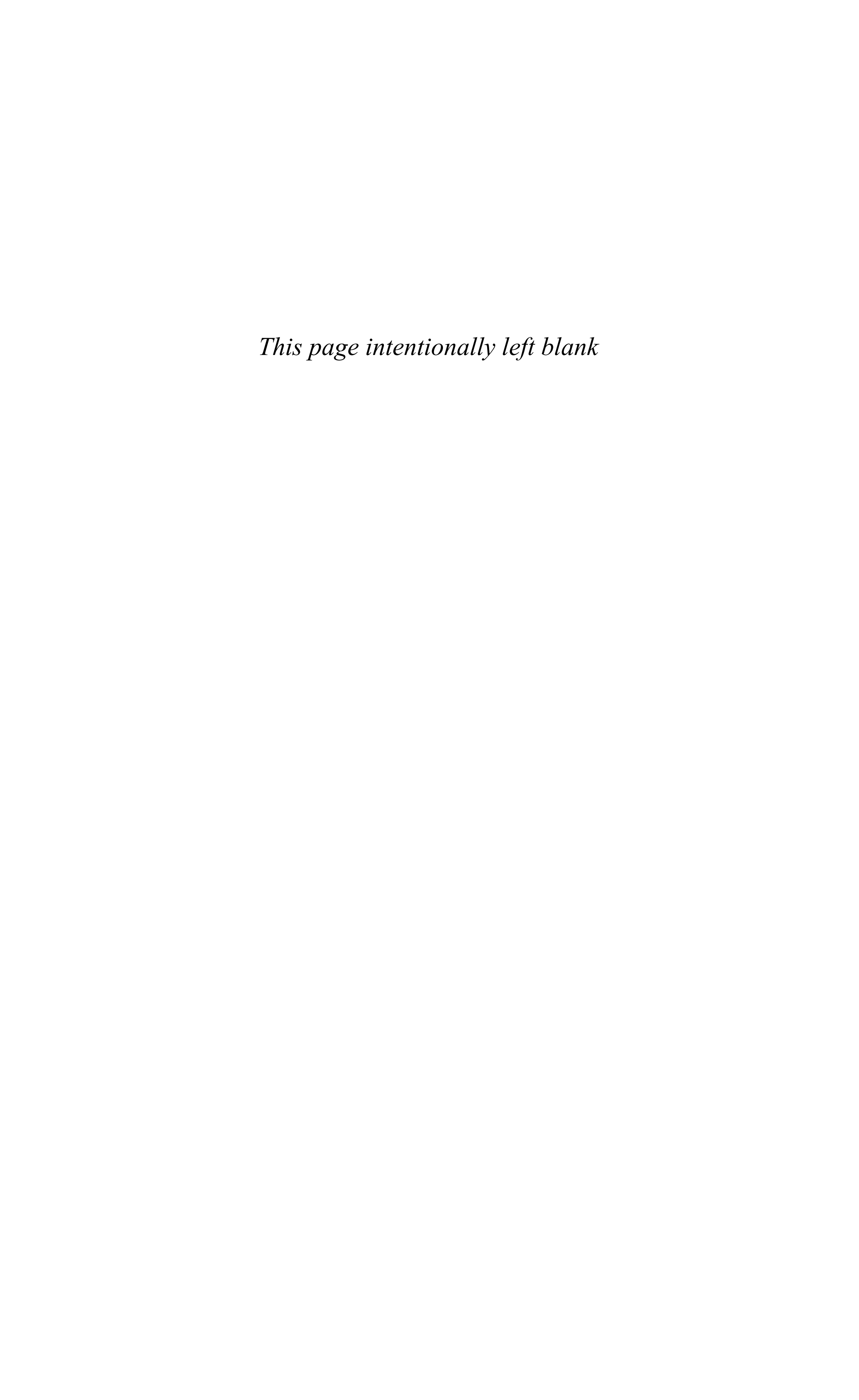
	Narrator's Introduction: I Samuel 16:1–13	Introduced to Saul (#1): I Samuel 16:14–23	Introduced to Saul (#2): I Samuel 17:1–54	Introduced to Saul (#3): I Samuel 17:55–18:5
WHO IS DAVID?	One whom God only knows; overlooked by father Jesse; not Samuel's first of subsequent choices.	Described to Saul as "one of the sons of Jesse"; responsive; musician, soothes Saul, loved by Saul.	Goes to Saul's court (Saul doesn't seem to recognize who he is); talkative warrior, pious & political.	"Whose son are you?" asks Saul, after loving, meeting David.
RESPONDING Versus INITIATING	Responding Does as told: says nothing, does nothing.	Responding Does as told: delivers food and wine to Saul; plays music for Saul.	Initiating, Talking Doesn't bring food, as told (runs to his brothers, empty handed). Asks about a reward for killing Goliath; Offers sharp retort to older brother's jibes; Asks more people about the reward; Speaks to Saul: *leave Goliath to me*; Refuses armor; picks out stones; Sharp retort to Goliath; runs to meet Goliath; slays Goliath; runs to the corpse; beheads Goliath; takes head to Jerusalem; puts weapons of Goliath in his own tent.	Responding Simply answers the above question.
RESPONSE TO DAVID	Spirit of the Lord seizes on David.	The Lord is with him; Saul loves him, is soothed by the music.	Eliab: you are impudent. David: "What have I done now?" Goliath scoffs, Philistines flee.	Jonathan loves him; staff and all people respect him.

God to David. What is he supposed to do? What will happen to him? Who is he? How will he respond, what will he initiate? Perhaps the story would have us muse on this question: which is easier to negotiate as a human being, the gift to Saul of divine direction, or David's initial lack of such direction, an apparently open field of possibility?

To assert that Saul's fate is doomed by divine directives whereas David has no such traps arranged by God is to miss what is being set up in this story as the mystery of David and the precariousness of his open field of opportunity.[22]

The story of David, in the Samuel account,[23] is in no dramatic rush to locate what it is about David that makes him a man after the divine heart. This is a story that explores a human heart and takes its entirety to do so. The implicit promise to the careful reader is increased understanding not simply of David's heart, but of the divine heart as well, a heart that has taken delight in David.

Saul's love for David turns to jealousy, murderous rage, and pursuit. Saul's best warrior is forced to escape from the one person, the king, who stands most to gain from the young man's services (God does not instruct David to flee, nor does David ask). Saul's demonstrated fear of low standing in the eyes of the people he is supposed to be leading is here confirmed as an uncorrectable character flaw. But David fears, also. In the contrast between how the two handle fear, and in the differences in how each uses the sword and spear, we come to clearer insight about David's character, with Saul as foil. These two patterns, or motifs, interlock with each other—along with a third, a trio of episodes in which David refrains from using his sword and spear poorly. This third pattern has a chapter by itself (chapter 4).


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3

Saul and David—Fear; Sword and Spear

Patterns 4 and 5

Immediately following the slaying of Goliath and Saul's mystifying query about who the young slayer was, David becomes the object of Saul's fear and murderous jealousy, a minidrama of cat-and-mouse that takes up the last half of I Samuel, concluding with Saul's suicide. The contrast between David and Saul continues to be spelled out, implicitly but surely, through various repetitions of narrative detail—most conspicuously, the motifs of fear and of the use of sword and spear. Still another and striking pattern (which I take up in chapter 4) occurs in the middle of David's fleeing from Saul, when twice David spares the king's life—and spares, as well, the life of a common fool. The two motifs of this chapter plus the triadic pattern of the next serve to further illustrate just what distinguishes David from Saul. Such advancing clarity, of course, functions also to explain better the mind of God in fastening on David rather than Saul.

Pattern 4: Saul's Fear, David's Fear

The narrator has already established an important contrast between David and Saul by juxtaposing multiple introductions of David with the multiple anointings and paralleled wrongdoings of Saul. An essential feature of the continuing contrast, as Saul pursues David, is their respective handling of fear. This contrast is delineated as follows, in six episodes—three to do with Saul's fear, and three

with David's. The final three episodes form a concluding chiasm in which David's response to fear frames Saul's response.

Saul's fear, 1: "Saul was afraid of David" (I, 18:12)
Saul's fear, 2: "Saul was still more afraid of David" (I, 18:29)
David's fear, 1: "David . . . was very much afraid of King Achish" (I, 21:12)
David's fear, 2 (chiastic FRAME): Deception of the Philistine (I, 27:1–28:2)
Saul's fear, 3 (chiastic CENTER): Deception of a Medium (I, 28:3–25)
David's fear, 3 (chiastic FRAME): Deception of the Philistine (I, 29:1–31)

I will examine each episode in turn.

Saul's Fear, 1: "Saul Was Afraid of David" (I, 18:11)

Saul is hesitant in looking for the lost asses; he hides in the baggage as lots for Israel's first king are drawn, even though he has already been anointed by the prophet Samuel; twice Saul exhibits fear-based defensiveness in response to the prophet's condemnation of the king's wrongdoing. God has seen enough, giving up on Saul in favor of a better man. And so it comes about that "the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him" (I, 16:14). That God seems to compound for Saul an already existing fearfulness is a narrative problem I will take up in the conclusion to this chapter.

David was brought to court in order to soothe a very troubled king. It worked, and "Saul loved him greatly" (I, 16:21). David then met Saul again, but Saul doesn't recognize him. After David killed Goliath, Saul put David in charge of some troops. David was hugely successful. Maidens sang their song praising David above Saul; "Saul was very angry" and "eyed David from that day on" (18:8–9). Having given Saul another heart only to see him succumb repeatedly to fearfulness (I, 10:9), God has now given him over to the violent outcroppings of such fear:

> The next day an evil spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand; Saul threw the spear, for he thought, "I will pin David to the wall."
>
> But David eluded him twice. Saul was afraid of David, because the Lord was with him but had departed from Saul. So Saul removed him from his presence, and made him a commander of a thousand; and David marched out and came in, leading the army.

> David had success in all his undertakings; for the Lord was with him. When Saul saw that he had great success, he stood in awe of him. But all Israel and Judah loved David; for it was he who marched out and came in leading them.
>
> Then Saul said to David, "Here is my elder daughter Merab; I will give her to you as a wife; only be valiant for me and fight the Lord's battles."
>
> For Saul thought, "I will not raise a hand against him; let the Philistines deal with him." (I, 18:10–17)

All Israel and Judah love David, and the king stands in awe of him. And fears him, murderously.

Saul's Fear, 2: "Saul Was Still More Afraid of David" (I, 18:29)

The king is wrong in expecting that the Philistines will "deal with [David];" David triumphs and Saul reneges on his promise of his daughter Merab to David.

Complicating matters, "Saul's daughter Michal loved David" (I, 18:20)—not the promised Merab, who is given by the king to another man. Once again Saul schemes: "Let me give [Michal] to him that she may be a snare for him and the hand of the Philistines may be against him" (I, 18:20–21). But through his men, Saul lets David know that a hundred Philistines' foreskins would be very pleasing to the king as a wedding present. The king's murderous intentions, now formulated in terms of Michal's being a snare, are repeated—by the narrator this time: "Saul planned to make David fall by the hand of the Philistines" (I, 18:25).

David immediately completes the dangerous task, doubling the number of requested foreskins. The king is forced to yield his daughter in marriage to David.

Realizing that the Lord is with David and that Michal loves David, "Saul was still more afraid of David." Runaway fear drives Saul mad with enmity: having loved David, "Saul was David's enemy from that time forward" (18:29).

David's Fear, 1: "David . . . Was Very Much Afraid of King Achish" (I, 21:12)

We see David escape from Saul, by window at night, aided by his newly wedded wife, Michal (I, 19:11–17). We see him fleeing from that point on:

seven times we are told that David fled Saul (I, 10:10; 19:12; 19:18; 20:1; 21:10; 22:17; 27:4). Presumably David experiences fear.

At one point, the narrator makes explicit reference to this fear. David has escaped Saul's clutches, finally, to the only safe haven, enemy territory. He presents himself to the Philistine monarch, King Achish of Gath. (The same Gath was the home of the slain Goliath.) All goes well, apparently, until Achish's men balk. Is this not the one, they ask their king, about whom it has been sung "Saul has killed his thousands, and David his ten thousands"? (I, 21: 11) How steely-hearted is the giant-slayer? "David took these words to heart and was very much afraid of King Achish" (I, 21:12).

The explicit mention of what lies in David's heart may come as a revelation—we have heard so little about the inner man[1]—but it does not come as a surprise. David's fear of King Achish suggests that in fleeing from Saul, David has not been impervious to fear.

What will David do in this very tight spot—what can he do—since he is recognized and exposed to Achish as an enemy of this Philistine king? This incident highlights David's resourcefulness in handling such fear. His deception is exquisite, and the motivation clear:

> David took these words to heart and was very much afraid of King Achish of Gath. So he changed his behavior before them; he pretended to be mad when in their presence. He scratched marks on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle run down his beard.
>
> Achish said to his servants, "Look, you see the man is mad; why then have you brought him to me? Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this fellow to play the madman in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?"
>
> David left there and escaped to the cave of Adullam; when his brothers and all his father's house heard of it, they went down there to him.

Is David possibly dry-mouthed with fear? Creating spittle when "very much afraid"—enough to have it run down his beard—is just a small detail of David's capacities, a trickery that highlights his multifaceted talents.

Just prior to his escape from enemy Saul to the enemy Philistines, David has confided to Jonathan, "There is but a step between me and death" (I, 20:3). Now, in the company of Achish and his hostile men, there is, palpably, *but a step between [David] and death*. One false note in his performance as a madman and the actor behind the mask becomes exposed, and presumably dead.

But King Achish is taken in, chiding his men for allowing a fool into the king's presence: "Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this fellow to play

the madman in my presence?" (I, 21:15). To preserve his own life, David plays the fool that he is not; to rob David of his life, Saul plays the fool that he is (by his own confession).[2]

How striking that the first clear exposure of David's heart should be a fearfulness echoing what lies at the heart of Saul's slow descent toward suicide. What most distinguishes Saul and David from each other, in regard to fear, are their responses, along with the goals of their respective deceits in coping with fearsome circumstances. Unable to deal with the present, Saul is shown consulting a medium in order to explore a future that seems disastrously certain; David deals with the present in order to ensure a future he cannot fully envision.

"Who am I," David will ask of God, "that you have brought me thus far?" (II, 7:18) David's character is portrayed as an unfolding journey, open to the ambiguity of "thus far." Saul has apparently sealed his own fate, with no openness, no journey—merely, though engagingly, a playing out of preoccupation with fear and its predictably grim outcomes. Saul himself intuits such a destiny, a future now determined, as Cheryl Exum sees, in a sad trajectory downward.[3]

David's future is open, uncertain—scary? The narrator goes on, immediately, to include more details indicating the full panoply of David's resourcefulness, and his attractiveness as a leader and even as a family man, a man who plans ahead for unknown contingencies. David has escaped to a wilderness cave, at Adullam. His family hears of it, and joins him. For fear of Saul? Out of loyalty to David?

> Everyone who was in distress, and everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him; and he became captain over them. Those who were with him numbered about four hundred.
>
> David went from there to Mizpeh of Moab. He said to the king of Moab, "Please let my father and mother come to you, until I know what God will do for me."
>
> He left them with the king of Moab, and they stayed with him all the time that David was in the stronghold. (I, 22:1–4)

Until I know what God will do for me—whatever that may be. It's open. David makes himself captain over the four hundred, and then what? A prophet tells him to move from the cave, to Judah. David goes, and seeks out a spot in a forest. What now?

What we know now that we haven't known before is that David is capable of fear, of being "very much afraid." The contrast between Saul and David in

their handling of fear becomes increasingly stark toward the end of I Samuel, up through the suicide of Saul. Emphasizing the contrast between their responses to fear is a concluding chiasm in which David's paralleled responses to fear, each time in the company of the Philistine King Achish, helps to frame Saul's response. The three episodes are grouped closely together.

David's fear, 2: Deception of the Philistine (chiastic FRAME, I, 27:1–28:2)
Saul's fear, 3: Deception of a Medium (chiastic CENTER, I, 28:3–25)
David's fear, 3: Deception of the Philistine (chiastic FRAME, I, 29:1–31)

David's Fear 2: Deception of King Achish (Opening Chiastic Frame, I, 27:1–28:2)

In an account that parallels the preceding episode of David's being "very much afraid" before King Achish (six chapters earlier), we now find David once again duping the Philistine king. In short order—in the concluding frame of this minichiasm—he will do so again. King Saul's response to fear is also duplicitous. But the deceptions of David and of Saul could not work toward more different ends.

Immediately after a second sparing of Saul's life (see chapter 4), we hear of David's strategizing—a plan we have already seen: "I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul; there is nothing better for me than to escape to the land of the Philistines; then Saul will despair of seeking me any longer within the borders of Israel, and I shall escape out of his hand" (I, 27:1).

What strange business is this, to think Achish can be duped again? The undoubtedly multiple sources behind the story as we have it, as suggested already, are made to work toward important narrative ends, cohesively, coherently.

We are told, initially, that David, his two wives, and his six hundred men (with their households) "stayed with Achish at Gath" (I, 27:3). Perhaps the enemy king is more favorably disposed toward David now, since he has a sizable force with him. Or perhaps the story's audience is to assume that the madman disguise was so effective as to leave Achish with no clear memory of what David actually looked like. We are left with only the memory of David's last fear-filled encounter with the same king.

David asks the King for a city of his own—"for why should your servant live in the royal city with you?" (I, 27:5) Given the village of Ziklag, David plays servant to the enemy king, who trusts David (I, 27:12). Perhaps, as many commentators point out, David has actually allied himself, shamefully, with

the Philistine effort against Israel. Maybe. What we have in the story before us, however, is great narrative fun in David's cunning, an outwitting that actually harms the Philistines—though they themselves don't recognize what David is up to.[4]

We cannot be certain about the historical truth behind the text. But the narrative as we have it stands brilliantly as a repetition of prior subterfuge in the face of fear.

"Servant" David takes further initiative, raiding various troublemakers Israel faces: the Geshurites, the Girzites, and the Amalekites. But Achish must be kept from knowing the reality, that David has, in effect, been aiding Israel. So David extends his capacity for deception—beginning with his lying to the priest Ahimelech—from mere prevarication to bloody ruthlessness.[5]

> When Achish asked, "Against whom have you made a raid today?" David would say, "Against the Negeb of Judah," or "Against the Negeb of the Jerahmeelites," or, "Against the Negeb of the Kenites."
>
> David left neither man nor woman alive to be brought back to Gath, thinking, "They might tell about us, and say, 'David has done so and so.' " Such was his practice all the time he lived in the country of the Philistines. (I, 27:10–11)

And so David, for sixteen months, is able to present his activities as aiding the Philistine king against the Israelites, while actually helping Israel against its possible enemies.

"Achish trusted David, thinking, 'He has made himself utterly abhorrent to his people Israel; therefore he shall always be my servant' " (I, 27:12). And perhaps it is possible to read into the text, or behind the text, or between the lines: *David actually did serve Achish.* We can't know, but what the writer has done in putting together this pattern of fear—David's and Saul's—is clearly extending, with great artistry, the fundamental flaw of Saul while contrasting that with David's response to fearfulness. Fearing for his life, David flees to an enemy he cons into providing him safe refuge, even as he slaughters potential allies of this enemy, Israel's enemy.

And now Achish plans to go to war against Israel, and tells David to come along with his men—to fight with him against the Israelites. What can David say? In fact, he responds ambiguously, "you shall know what your servant can do." And King Achish responds, "Very well, I will make you my bodyguard for life" (I, 28:1–2). What is David thinking? Apparently the ruse, if this is what David practices here, works.

Suddenly the story switches to Saul, suspending the current dilemma faced by David. The audience must wait to see how this matter of David fighting against his own people will turn out. The interruption, of course, serves a narrative point: a comparison of David and Saul relative to their respective fears and their handling of those fears.

Saul's Fear, 3: Deception of a Medium (Chiastic Center, I, 28:3–25)

Framed by David's brilliant deceptions of the enemy's king, Saul's sacrilegious deception in calling forth a medium receives a special focus. It doesn't get worse than this.

"Now Samuel died" we have already heard (I, 25:1), and now again we are reminded, "Samuel had died" (I, 28:3). Why the repetition?

The answer is implied by narrative mention, immediately, of Saul's fear, and his forlornness in that fear:

> The Philistines assembled, and came and encamped at Shunem. Saul gathered all Israel, and they encamped at Gilboa. When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. When Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, not by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets. (I, 28:4–6)

Prophets cannot answer to Saul's fear, and confidant Samuel is dead. Desperate, Saul will try to get Samuel back from the dead.

The first mention of Samuel's death occurs out of the narrative blue, between David's having spared Saul the first time and his sparing the scoundrel Nabal (I, 25:1). There, the citing of Samuel's death and Israel's mourning serves as a reminder that David has lost his guide. David is on his own, without his prophet and confidant, but can still hear the voice of God from the mouth of a foreign woman, Abigail (discussed in chapter 4)—and can act with restraint, not killing enemies wantonly, without the official prophet urging such restraint. Saul also is on his own, at this point of the repeated mention of Samuel's death. But he cannot move ahead. He needs a word, from beyond death if need be. His solicitation through a medium has been forbidden in Israel—by Saul himself.

After being spared twice by David, by whom he has been mightily distracted, Saul is suddenly overwhelmed with the threat of his true enemy, the enemy of the people whose well-being God has entrusted to the king. But now even God has forsaken the king, for apparently good reason.

"When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly" (I, 28:5). *He was afraid.*

> So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes and went [to a medium], he and two men with him. They came to the woman by night.
>
> And he said, "Consult a spirit for me, and bring up for me the one whom I name to you."
>
> The woman said to him, "Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the wizards from the land. Why then are you laying a snare for my life to bring about my death?"
>
> But Saul swore to her by the Lord, "As the Lord lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing."
>
> Then the woman said, "Whom shall I bring up for you?"
>
> He answered, "Bring up Samuel for me."
>
> When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice; and the woman said to Saul, "Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!" (I, 28:7–12)

Samuel, roused from death, is not pleased. "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" he asks Saul (I, 28:15).

Samuel obliges, however, by giving Saul the answer to his query—and more than just an answer. The story's narrator takes this opportunity to highlight Samuel's words about what Saul's problem was in the first place, a wrongdoing prompted by the king's fear of his people:

> "The Lord has done to you just as he spoke by me; for the Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hand, and given it to your neighbor, David. Because you did not obey the voice of the Lord, and did not carry out his fierce wrath against Amalek, therefore the Lord has done this thing to you today. Moreover the Lord will give Israel along with you into the hands of the Philistines; and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me; the Lord will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines."
>
> Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, filled with fear. (I, 28:17–20)

At the heart of this disobedience, the audience will recall, was what the king himself reveals to Samuel: "I feared the people and obeyed their voice"—rather than obeying the voice of God (I, 15:24). Now, at the end of his life, the king lies prostrate with the same uncontrolled fear ratcheted up, a despair expressed in the position of death itself, a falling full-length on the ground.

Fearful Saul had become king, had heard that he was being replaced as king, and apparently lives in what seems like mortal fear of the demotion in status. What is someone in his predicament to do? This particular story of Saul and David implies that Saul might have done other and better than what he did, this expending of time, energy, and troops in a mad pursuit of David rather than of the true enemy, the Philistines. King Saul works against the interests of his people, God's people: to solve his fear, he seeks to eliminate Israel's best warrior. But is not Saul to be pitied? How unnatural, the audience might think, if Saul were to graciously accept the career-ending fiat of God, doing as well as he can while king and then at the appropriate time returning with equanimity to herding for his father. Yet this is the implicit choice: to reign poorly, vindictively, and murderously or to reign as well as possible, though under the cloud of knowing that God has chosen someone "better" as replacement, whenever and however that would work out.

There is no irreversible fate in Saul's handling of his kingship.[6] Knowing that he is to be replaced in his role as king, while still reigning, Saul has a choice. In fact, the story will highlight David's capacity to do just what Saul cannot: face the possibility of God's disfavor and the resulting loss of his reign as king with grace and resignation (II, 15: 24–26; II, 16:9–12; chapter 5 here).

Not inevitable fate: Saul is surely doomed because of his handling of fear. Ridding himself of the competition for the throne reveals a deep anxiety about his standing, a dark soil yielding the fruit of murderous jealousy and manipulation of a realm beyond life that belongs exclusively to God. Saul's quest for certainty through the medium stems from fear regarding his own status rather than care for Israel: *am I not the king, am I not to be sustained as king and admired above all others?*

Back-from-death Samuel repeats to Saul his original and primal problem. That which consumed him to begin with, a fearful disposition and disobedience, is the fuel for an increasing fear that fills him entirely at the end.

David's Fear, 3: Deception of King Achish (Closing Chiastic Frame, I, 29:1–31)

This ending frame of David's deception of Achish, paralleling the opening frame, could not more emphatically contrast with Saul's deception of the medium. All three deceptions are an attempt to handle fear.

The medium has seen the nearly comatose Saul, "that he was terrified" and not eating; she coaxes him to eat, and finally he leaves, with his men.

Immediately we are back to the narrative cliffhanger, with David's having offered his military presence to King Achish in a battle against Saul and his Israelite forces (I, 28:21–29:2). The contrast between the fear and deception of Saul and David comes to its climax. It is a remarkable account of David's last touch of trickery, an audacious gesture of deception in which he protests his loyalty to the enemy.

> As the lords of the Philistines were passing on by hundreds and by thousands, and David and his men were passing on in the rear with Achish, the commanders of the Philistines said, "What are these Hebrews doing here?"
>
> Achish said to the commanders of the Philistines, "Is this not David, the servant of King Saul of Israel, who has been with me now for days and years? Since he deserted to me I have found no fault in him to this day."
>
> But the commanders of the Philistines were angry with him; and the commanders of the Philistines said to him, "Send the man back, so that he may return to the place that you have assigned to him; he shall not go down with us to battle, or else he may become an adversary to us in the battle. For how could this fellow reconcile himself to his lord? Would it not be with the heads of the men here? Is this not David, of whom they sing to one another in dances,
>
> 'Saul has killed his thousands,
> and David his ten thousands'?"
>
> Then Achish called David and said to him, "As the Lord lives, you have been honest, and to me it seems right that you should march out and in with me in the campaign; for I have found nothing wrong in you from the day of your coming to me until today. Nevertheless the lords do not approve of you. So go back now; and go peaceably; do nothing to displease the lords of the Philistines." David said to Achish, "But what have I done? What have you found in your servant from the day I entered your service until now, that I should not go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king?"
>
> Achish replied to David, "I know that you are as blameless in my sight as an angel of God; nevertheless, the commanders of the Philistines have said, 'He shall not go up with us to the battle.' Now then rise early in the morning, you and the servants of your lord who came with you, and go to the place that I appointed for you. As for the evil report, do not take it to heart, for you have done well before me. Start early in the morning, and leave as soon as you have light."

> So David set out with his men early in the morning, to return to the land of the Philistines. But the Philistines went up to Jezreel. (I, 29:2–11)

As in the first deception several chapters earlier (David feigning madness, I, 21:10–15), the narrator includes Achish's warriors' alarm about this most popular champion of Israel. At stake, now, is not just the life of David and his small band of followers, but that of his people, Israel, against whom he is willing to battle—or so he says to Achish.

David puts on the appearance of being incensed and hurt at the Philistine king's doubt of his loyalty: once again, he proves consummate actor. Our two choices here, as Robert Pinsky notes, are to interpret David as a traitor or as a brilliant schemer.[7] And once again, the Philistine king catches not a glimmer of the real David: Achish says, "you are as blameless as an angel of God" (I, 29:9).

From the start, appearances of the real David have been deceptive. For Achish, David is certainly no angel. God is quoted as saying to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance . . . [mortals] look on the outward appearance" (I, 16:7). But we are seeing here another level of appearance that beguiles. David embellishes God's observation regarding human gullibility in misreading appearances with his own added chicanery: it is hard enough for Samuel or anyone else to get a proper bead on David without David himself assuming an actor's mask. Achish takes David for his guardian angel. At the very least, David is not the foreign king's angel.

As we have seen, Saul's deception from the beginning was decidedly negative, trying to have David killed by requesting one hundred Philistine foreskins in exchange for the hand of the king's daughter. David's paralleled deceptions of the Philistine enemy are both clever and appropriate. The point at which the writer's artistry is greatest, showing his hero pushed to the limits of fear and subterfuge, is the most tempting place for historians to see "the real David" as complicit with the Philistine enemy.[8] What is revealed through this pattern of fear, in any case, is a subtle but convincing comparison of Saul and David in the matter of handling fear. Here David's deception leads to his dismissal from the Philistine enemy, and he is off again, fighting an enemy, Israel's seemingly forever nemesis, the Amalekites.

This mini-chiasm, Saul at his worst fear and deception framed by David's fear but efficacious deception, nicely concludes the matter of fear, and the sharp contrasts in how Saul and David, respectively, handle that fear.

Pattern 5: The Motif of Sword and Spear: Further Contrasts 1

David appeared before Goliath without a sword and was able to dodge Saul's thrown spear. In the end, Saul falls on his own spear, suicidally (I, 18–31). Throughout David's flight from Saul, which dominates the last half of I Samuel, we hear repeated and significant references to spear and sword that help to further distinguish David from Saul.

David, 1: "the Lord does not save by sword and spear" (I, 17:45, 47; 17:39, 50–51)
Saul, 1: "Saul threw the spear" to kill David (I, 18:10–11; 19:9–10)
Saul, 2: "Saul threw the spear" to kill his son Jonathan (I, 20:33)
Saul, 3: Saul "put to the sword" Israelite priests (I, 21:1–6)
David, 2: Jonathan yields his sword (I, 17:50–51; 18:4)
David, 3: Three refusals to wield sword and spear against enemies (I, 24–26)
David, 4: Appropriate use of sword and spear (II, 30)
Saul, 4: Inappropriate use of sword: Saul's suicide (I, 31)

Whether such repetitions as the respective fear of Saul and David, or their contrasting uses of spear and sword, constitute full-blown patterns or merely motifs is a somewhat academic question, since the conspicuous references to fear and to sword and spear serve to offer a consistent view of the different characters of David and Saul, of what it is that makes David the "better man" whom God has been reported as finding in the person of David.

David, 1: "The Lord Does Not Save by Sword and Spear" (I, 17:45, 47; 17:39, 50–51)

The first phase of comparison is stark: David needs neither sword nor spear to oppose Israel's nemesis, the giant Goliath, while Saul, because of David's success, uses his spear in an attempt to kill David, Israel's giant-slayer.

Unable to wield Saul's sword for its heft (I, 17:39), David goes out to meet Israel's adversary, whose spear's shaft "was like a weaver's beam" (I, 17:7). David informs the giant that, his opinion, "The Lord does not save by sword and spear" (I, 17:47)—possibly dismissed as glib piety if not for a narrative context that will play out the depth of David's conviction here.

How remarkable, this victory: "David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone, striking down the Philistine and killing him; there was no sword in David's hand" (I, 17:50).

Nonetheless, a sword "in the name of the Lord" can be useful: "David ran and stood over the Philistine; he grasped his sword, drew it out of its sheath, and killed him; then he cut off his head with it" (I, 17:45; 51). Goliath's weighty spear does him no good, while his sword is used by the sword-less and spear-less David to take Goliath's life and sever his head.

David had proclaimed to the Philistine, "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied," and immediately, David found it helpful to repeat the phrase, with an eye to a broader audience—Philistines and Israelites both?—"that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear" (I, 17:45, 47).

David, 2: Jonathan Yields His Sword to David (I, 17:50–51; 18:4)

David has done nothing to rouse King Saul's ire, aside from being the best champion Saul could have summoned, and so kindling Saul's jealousy. David had refused the king's offer of a sword, claiming that it was too heavy. But David is shrewd enough to know, a bit later, that for what lies ahead, he needs a sword. He has taken Goliath's sword to his tent, and now he accepts one from the king's son, a needed implement of war but also a sign of royal succession: "Jonathan stripped himself of the robe that he was wearing, and gave it to David, and his armor, and even his sword and his bow and his belt" (I, 17:50–51; 18:4). David prepares for an uncertain but hopeful future, accepting confirmation from Jonathan that the kingdom will go to David rather than to himself.[9]

But for a long while we hear nothing of David's use of sword or spear—except as an object lesson for Saul, when David will spare the king's life twice.

Saul, 1: "Saul Threw the Spear" to Kill David, Twice (I, 18:10–11; 19:9–10)

A few verses later, we find another key reference to a spear: "[Saul] raved within his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand . . . and Saul threw the spear, for he thought, 'I will pin David to the wall.' But David eluded him twice" (I, 18:10–11).

This is followed in very short narrative order by a repeat performance: "as [Saul] sat in his house with his spear in his hand, while David was playing music. . . . Saul sought to pin David to the wall with the spear; but he eluded Saul, so that he struck the spear into the wall. David fled and escaped that night" (19: 9–10).

Saul, 2: "Saul Threw the Spear" to Kill His Son Jonathan (I, 20:33)

Jonathan has gone to confront his father about the king's attempts to kill David, who has done no wrong, "but Saul threw his spear at him to strike him; so Jonathan knew that it was the decision of his father to put David to death" (20:33).

King Saul hurls a spear at his own son, David's close friend—David, champion of Israel. David is beloved by all Israel, a glorious warrior, and especially loved by the Jonathan. *If David eludes my thrown spear,* Saul might have thought, *I'll try to spear his friend, my own son.* Over and over again, Saul's desperate misuse of weapons intended for the enemy condemns him.

Saul, 3: Saul "Put to the Sword" Israelite Priests (I, 21:1–6)

Shortly after intending death by hurling his spear both at his own son Jonathan and at his best warrior, David, Saul uses his sword to kill—"put to the sword"—more than eighty Israelite priests in protest over a perceived slight, a favoring of David by the priests' providing food for the fleeing David and his men.

David has gone to the priest Ahimelech, on behalf of his men and himself, desperate for food. Improvising a lie about being sent on a secret mission by King Saul, David requests from the priest, and is granted, food for himself and his men (I, 21:1–6).[10] Only holy bread is available, but David insists. Ahimelech gives in; David and his men have strength to move on in their flight from Saul. In addition, David takes the sword of Goliath, which has been kept by the priest, after making inquiry: "Is there no spear or sword here with you? I did not bring my sword or my weapons with me, because the king's business required haste" (I, 21:8–9). The young man can improvise.

Meanwhile—the narrative never lets us forget—Saul is in pursuit of David. We find Saul bemoaning a perceived conspiracy against himself in regard to his pursuit of David.

> Saul heard that David and those who were with him had been located. Saul was sitting at Gibeah, under the tamarisk tree on the height, with his spear in his hand, and all his servants were standing around him. Saul said to his servants who stood around him, "Hear now, you Benjaminites; will the son of Jesse give every one of you fields and vineyards, will he make you all commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds? Is that why all of you have conspired against me? No one discloses to me when my son makes a

> league with the son of Jesse, none of you is sorry for me or discloses to me that my son has stirred up my servant against me, to lie in wait, as he is doing today." (I, 22:6–8)

Saul was sitting *with his spear in his hand:* twice before we have heard these precise words (I, 18:11; 19:9); each time, he hurls the spear at David, and here again King Saul, presumably Israel's chief warrior, *had his spear in his hand*. For what purpose? He seeks David, not the enemy Philistines.

> Doeg the Edomite, who was in charge of Saul's servants, answers the king's query about David: "I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech son of Ahitub; he inquired of the Lord for him, gave him provisions, and gave him the sword of Goliath the Philistine." (I, 22:9–10)

David is reported as often inquiring of the Lord, and here Ahimelech the priest does precisely that, on David's behalf.

The king ignores Doeg's detail that God has something to do with David's being given the food.

> The king sent for the priest Ahimelech son of Ahitub and for all his father's house, the priests who were at Nob; and all of them came to the king.
>
> Saul said, "Listen now, son of Ahitub." He answered, "Here I am, my lord." Saul said to him, "Why have you conspired against me, you and the son of Jesse, by giving him bread and a sword, and by inquiring of God for him, so that he has risen against me, to lie in wait, as he is doing today?"

The priest's first defense before the king has nothing to do with the charges, but with David, "honored in your house."

> Then Ahimelech answered the king, "Who among all your servants is so faithful as David? He is the king's son-in-law, and is quick to do your bidding, and is honored in your house. Is today the first time that I have inquired of God for him? By no means! Do not let the king impute anything to his servant or to any member of my father's house; for your servant has known nothing of all this, much or little."
>
> The king said, "You shall surely die, Ahimelech, you and all your father's house."
>
> The king said to the guard who stood around him, "Turn and kill the priests of the Lord, because their hand also is with David; they knew that he fled, and did not disclose it to me."

> But the servants of the king would not raise their hand to attack the priests of the Lord. (I, 22:11–17b)

But the servants of the king would not raise their hand to attack the priests of the Lord, and so Saul turns to a lackey.

> "You, Doeg, turn and attack the priests." Doeg the Edomite turned and attacked the priests; on that day he killed eighty-five who wore the linen ephod. Nob, the city of the priests, he put to the sword; men and women, children and infants, oxen, donkeys, and sheep, he put to the sword. (I, 22:18–19)

It is a bloody and sacrilegious massacre, all part of the king's pursuit of the one who is honored throughout Israel.

As is so often the case, David's response to the horror is surprising but not unexpected. A son of Ahimelech, Abiathar, escapes to David.

> Abiathar told David that Saul had killed the priests of the Lord. David said to Abiathar, "I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul. I am responsible for the lives of all your father's house. Stay with me, and do not be afraid; for the one who seeks my life seeks your life; you will be safe with me." (I, 22:20–23)

David accepts responsibility for the slaughter, but we do not know how he feels about it. Whether David was technically to blame is not certain from the text.[11]

Clearly the narrative focus is on the need for David's flight from Saul, and on the king's indiscriminately murderous use of the sword through his henchman Doeg. In addition, we learn here of David's range of God-devotedness in taking the blame for the priests' slaughter—a response juxtaposed to the king's willingness to use spear and sword to murder not only Israel's champion and the king's own son, Jonathan, but even the priests of Israel.

Again: *the servants of the king would not raise their hand to attack the priests of the Lord*. Here is a leader of God's people, says the story, whose servants know better than their king: they have disobeyed his heinous instructions on using their swords to slay Israel's priests.

David, 3: David's Refusals to Wield Sword and Spear against His Enemies (I, 24–26)

In the middle of the flight sequence, we come to the triad of sparing stories. (I explore them briefly here and in greater depth in chapter 4, since they form a rather tightly knit pattern.)

FIRST REFUSAL. David approaches an unaware and defecating king with some sort of cutting implement—a spear? a sword?—with which he deprives the king, not of his life but of a piece of the king's royal garment. David claims to the king that his cutting the garment rather than killing the person is proof "that there is no wrong or treason in my hands"—and here "you are hunting me to take my life" (I, 24:11). A spear is not hurled, a sword does not hack.

SECOND REFUSAL. In the second story, David has gotten all his men to strap on their swords, against an insulting and penurious fool, Nabal. David himself straps on the sword (I, 25:13). But he hears a godly word from Abigail, and retreats from his sword-bearing purposes.

THIRD REFUSAL. This third episode brings together sword-and-spear echoes in a quite telling manner, centering on the spear of Saul, with which David could have pinned Saul to the ground.

> So David and Abishai went to the army by night; there Saul lay sleeping within the encampment, with his spear stuck in the ground at his head; and Abner and the army lay around him. Abishai said to David, "God has given your enemy into your hand today; now therefore let me pin him to the ground with one stroke of the spear; I will not strike him twice."

David's response is categorical: "The Lord forbid that I should raise my hand against the Lord's anointed; but now take the spear that is at his head, and the water jar, and let us go."

Then, speaking finally to Saul, David says, "Here is the spear O king! Let one of the young men come over and get it" (I, 26:7; 8, 11, 12; 16, 22).

David, 4: Appropriate Use of Sword and Spear (II, 30)

Just before Saul is shown taking his life in the face of overwhelming enemy forces, David appears in all his enemy-fighting glory—with largesse toward all except the enemy.

David is perfectly able to use his sword and spear as they should be used, against an enemy. In David's absence, marauders, the Amalekites, have ransacked David's city of Ziklag, burning it and carrying off all inhabitants, along with spoils. David tracks down the Amalekites and attacks, successfully. All is returned to Ziklag; spoils are offered even to even the baggage handlers and then distributed to the various towns of Judah (II, 30)

David's appropriate use of sword and spear is followed up by a largesse that appears simultaneously genuine while functioning as a politically shrewd gesture. In the return of spoils to Judah after the Ziklag affair, David rewards even the baggage keepers, insisting that everyone be happy, not just the rewarded warriors (though at least one reader manages to find David implicated, here, in Saul's murder, I, 30:21–25).[12] David expands the circle of communal well-being, an action here that elicits from *all his people* a trusting faithfulness. Even while serving Achish, or so we are told, David's eye is on the good of Israel. From the start, God has wanted a capable leader, a prince-designate. Has God found in David one who will shepherd the entire flock of Israel for the sake of Israel's communal well-being?

David's appropriate use of sword and spear, juxtaposed so consistently with Saul's inappropriate use of the same, includes the future king's getting back not only the goods stolen from Ziklag, but, for his acts of largesse and fairness, the favor of all the people.

In his months of precarious hiding from the Israelite king, within Philistine territory, David has embarked on a rather ruthless pursuit—with sword and spear—of building a kingdom for Israel (I, 30:26–31). As already suggested, the writer brings together differing and perhaps contradictory sources to produce a story of Saul that is coherent and compelling, even as it serves as a foil to David's story.[13]

Saul, 4: Height of Inappropriate Use: Suicide (II, 30)

We are given two versions of Saul's death, the first one by the story's narrator and the second by a self-seeking Amalekite (another possible instance of varying sources In the first, King Saul falls on his own sword (end of I Samuel); in the second, Saul requests of someone else—and is granted—an act of mercy killing, presumably with the spear on which the desperate king has been leaning (beginning of II Samuel).

The audience of the story knows, as the story unfolds into II Samuel, that the former version, the narrator's, is correct, simply because the biblical narrator is always reliable. Here is the account, ending with our last glimpe of the king's use of sword and spear.

> The battle pressed hard upon Saul; the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by them.
>
> Then Saul said to his armor-bearer, "Draw your sword and thrust me through with it, so that these uncircumcised may not come and thrust me through, and make sport of me."

> But his armor-bearer was unwilling; for he was terrified. So Saul took his own sword and fell upon it. When his armor-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his sword and died with him. (I, 31:3–5)

Conclusion

Without sword and spear, David kills a gargantuan enemy; with hurled spear, in close narrative order, we find Saul throwing spears at both his own son and David. In the middle of the flight sequence, we are reminded of this contrast in a most pointed way: David refrains from using sword or spear against Saul, who is in David's hands; capable of wielding a sword against an insulting fool, David is able to be deterred from doing so by a woman—a stranger. Saul could not exercise such restraint, even though his own son, the goodly Jonathan, exhorts his father. In the end, Saul uses his sword as an implement of his own death. Saul's propensity for misusing spear and sword proves his final undoing.

Whereas David has been shown handling his fear through clever, life-preserving measures, Saul is represented as capitulating to his fear, falling at the very end on his own sword. In no way does the text allow us to see any nobility in this act. The story yields no possibility of valuing, for example, Saul's having risen to the heights of finally taking charge of his own fortunes.[14] Here there is no rise, but rather a slow disintegration of person, a demise of spirit, a loss of sound deliberation and action. Saul's warriors end up suffering terrible death at the hands of the Philistines, an enemy long neglected because of Saul's pursuit of David. And the Israelite troops are missing their greatest warrior, David. Context is all, and in this case we have the surrounding narrative patterns regarding both the respective handling of fear, and uses of spear and sword.

The narrative context, of course, goes back to the beginning of Saul's story, his initial displays of fear, disobedience, and defensiveness. Early on we found Saul accused of divination, of trying to manipulate God (I, 15:23); in the end we find the same fear-filled divination in Saul's successful rousing of the dead Samuel through a medium. David, contrariwise, consistently escapes Saul and other dangers through the use of his wits and initiative—and through God's help. When David's town, Ziklag, given him by King Achish, is overcome (David is out on one of his raids), we hear that David, who "was in great danger," first "strengthened himself in the Lord his God" and then inquires of God whether he should pursue the culprits, and is given an affirmative (I, 30:1–8). Here is something we never see Saul do: strengthen himself in the Lord his God and *then* make inquiry of God. Saul's approach to God always

smacks of the manipulative. The explicit contrast between Saul and David is not about whether Saul or David is more fearful, or who has the greater predilection for wrongdoing. The narrative interest is, rather, in how each of Israel's first two kings handles his respective fear and wrongdoing—and how each responds to God, and how God responds to them in turn.

God had changed Saul's heart (I, 10:9), but the change did not stick. God does what God can do, apparently. Saul is finally untouched by God's having given him an alternate mind and spirit. In the last narrative analysis, God may influence but not commandeer human will in this or any other biblical story.[15] In reverting over and over to his fearful self, Saul is shown to have earned the enmity of God. Saul's fate is is largely if not entirely in his own hands; he is tragicallly done in by his own destructive choices.

Postscript: Saul, God, and the Blameworthy

But the matter demands, perhaps, a bit of a concluding excursus regarding Saul's fear and God's role in Saul's life as king. To what extent does the text impugn Saul for his fearfulness and poor response, given our first alert that "the spirit of the Lord departed from Saul, and an evil spirit from the Lord tormented him"? (I, 16:14)

The reference to the evil spirit in connection with Saul is a continuing note throughout the story. In each of the paralleled instances of Saul's hurling a spear at David, we have heard what would seemingly mitigate Saul's culpability in his murderous handling of fear: "an evil spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved," and again, "an evil spirit from the Lord came upon Saul" (I, 18:10; 19:9). Sandwiched between these two spear-hurling episodes is the explicit pinpointing of Saul's root problem: "Saul was afraid of David, because the Lord was with him but had departed from Saul" (18:12). How does the narrator wish the audience to view culpability in regard to Saul? God would seem to have played a role in Saul's lethal responses to fear.

The text provides perspectives on the question of God's desertion of Saul and the sending of an evil spirit.

First of all, Saul's fearfulness existed before any sending of an evil spirit. Fearfulness is present in two of Saul's three anointings, and is very much a root cause of his paralleled wrongdoing (chapter 1)—this in spite of the fact that in the first anointing, "God gave [Saul] another heart" (I, 10:9). Perhaps God gives, and God takes away—but not capriciously. In spite of "another heart" from God, Saul remains in or reverts to a state of fearfulness and its destructive possibilities—such that "the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel" (I, 15:35).

What God provided was overturned, apparently, by Saul himself, by his handling of a deep-seated fearfulness—with no mention of God's role.

A second answer implicating Saul himself is implied in the fact that a solution has been provided to the king's torment. "And whenever the evil spirit from God came upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand, and Saul would be relieved and feel better, and the evil spirit would depart from him" (I, 16:23). God gives the evil spirit, but David makes it go away. So then: David is a possible solution to Saul's fearful state of mind, a fact Saul chooses to ignore. Why not cherish David as musical therapist and, special bonus, as warrior champion against the king's and Israel's enemies? David can't be in the private chambers soothing the king at every moment, granted, but he can make visits between battles.

Saul is not helpless—he can still kill his "thousands." David's capacity to do better militarily than Saul can bring the king either relief or an exacerbation of anxiety. Later, an aging and enfeebled David will be shown gladly accepting a warrior's slaying of a giant; such an action is prized by King David (II, 21:15–17).

"Saul was very angry" when hearing about David's success against their common foe, and eyes David from henceforth. It is the king himself who becomes angry, who eyes David as a personal enemy to be eliminated rather than the public champion of Israel to be praised. Granted, God's giving up on Saul—evil spirit in place of God's spirit—does not help matters.

A final response to this dilemma of who is to blame for what, concerning Saul, has to do with the ancient understanding of particularly astonishing emotional states: surely the gods, or God, must be involved. Another way to put this, or a closely related corollary, is the notion expressed so clearly in Exodus that while Pharaoh himself hardens his heart, so, too, does God harden Pharaoh's heart.[16] The Lord tells Moses to offer Pharaoh a choice: "Let my people go, so that they may worship me. *If you refuse* to let them go," the plagues will come (8:2; emphasis mine). "If, in fact, Pharaoh's 'refusal' is a certainty," as Terence Fretheim observes, "then [for God] to hold it out as a possibility is deceitful."[17] In their respective narratives, it appears that Pharaoh has choice as does Saul. The matter in I Samuel is complex, but Freitheim's care with the Exodus text is instructive for our reading of the Saul-God dilemma.

David Gunn reads the story's God, at this point, as arbitrarily making trouble for Saul, God mysteriously aligned with a dark fate for Saul: "Once before there had come a point at which peace seemed to be a possibility between Saul and David, only to be broken by the evil spirit of Yahweh" (19:6–10)—which would make Saul's failure "the outworking of fate—fate which is in some hidden way the reflection of the will of Yahweh."[18]

Pattern Four: Saul's Fear, David's Fear

SAUL'S FEAR, DECEPTION	DAVID'S FEAR, DECEPTION
(1) "Saul was afraid of David." (2) "Saul was still more afraid of David." (3) "When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly."	(1) "David rose and fled that day from Saul." (2) "David took these words to heart and was very much afraid of King Achish of Gath."
Fear-Based deception	*Fear-Based deception*
"When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. . . . Desperate Saul disguises himself, consults a medium. . . ." Then Samuel [up from death] said to Saul, ' Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?' Saul answered, 'I am in great distress, for the Philistines are warring against me.'"	(1) [See above] "So he changed his behavior before them; he pretended to be mad when in their presence. He scratched marks on the doors of the gate, and let his spittle run down his beard." (2) Fear implied? "In those days the Philistines gathered their forces for war, to fight against Israel. Achish said to David, 'You know, of course, that you and your men are to go out with me in the army.' David said to Achish, 'Very well, then you shall know what your servant can do.'" (3) David is with Achish, going to battle against Israel. The Philistine troops protest, and the king tells David to go home. "David said to Achish, But what have I done? What have you found in your servant from the day I entered your service until now, that I should not go and fight against the enemies of my lord the king?"

The more nuanced view Fretheim suggests about what's going on between Pharaoh and God makes analogous sense in Saul's case. Both the pattern of Saul's anointing and the pattern of a paralleled wrongdoing that frames Jonathan's right-doing (see chapter 1) would indicate the narrative rationale for God's giving up on a recalcitrant leader like Saul. The biblical writer highlights such turning-away on God's part as definitive, a sending of an evil spirit. And so David must escape Saul and his court.

What follows in the story, as we have seen, confirms the utter wrongheadedness of Saul, who from this point on goes on a mad pursuit to kill David. When closest to this goal, at the cave juncture, the king is simultaneously murderous and vulnerable. It is no evil spirit sent from God that can be associated with Saul's confession. "You are upright and I am not," Saul says to David, "since you have behaved well to me, whereas I have behaved

Pattern Five: Saul and David, Use or Misuse of Sword and Spear

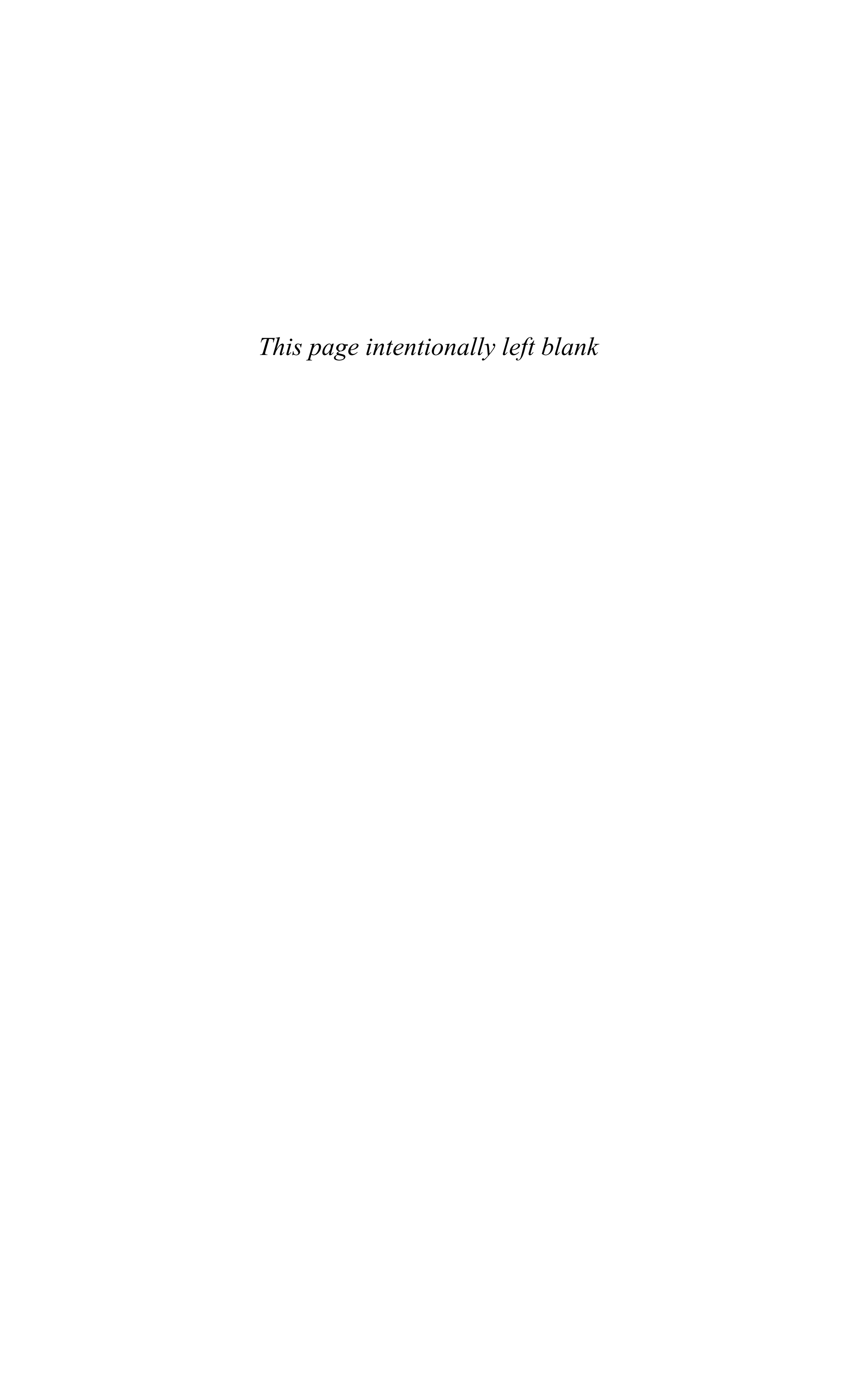
	SAUL	DAVID
SWORD & SPEAR	(1) "Saul had his spear in his hand; and Saul threw the spear, for he thought, 'I will pin David to the wall.'" (2) Saul, as he sat in his house with his spear in his hand, while David was playing music. Saul sought to pin David to the wall with the spear; but he eluded Saul, so that he struck the spear into the wall. David fled and escaped that night." (3) Then Jonathan answered his father Saul, "Why should he be put to death? What has he done?" But Saul threw his spear at him to strike him; so Jonathan knew that it was the decision of his father to put David to death. (4)"... the servants of the king would not raise their hand to attack the priests of the LORD. Then the king said to Doeg, 'You, Doeg, turn and attack the priests." Doeg the Edomite turned and attacked the priests; on that day he killed eighty-five who wore the linen ephod."	(1) (a) But David said to the Philistine, "You come to me with sword and spear and javelin; but I come to you in the name of the LORD of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied.... all this assembly [will] know that the LORD does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the LORD'S and he will give you into our hand." (b) "So David prevailed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone, striking down the Philistine and killing him; there was no sword in David's hand." (v. 50) (2) Jonathan yields his sword and kingdom rights to David. (3) Three refusals to wield his sword against enemies (4) David's temporary city, Ziklag, raided; he goes after them, attacking successfully.

badly to you.... When a man comes on his enemy, does he let him go unmolested?" (I, 24: 17–19). That is, Saul is capable of understanding the difference between the person who is upright and the one who is not. In self-recognition, the king weeps—and expresses to David his understanding that David is destined to be king (I, 24: 16, 20). In this last portion of I Samuel, we have found the person Saul recognizes as "in the right."

Both Saul and David are afraid in the seemingly unending chase. Both use or refrain from using sword and spear, with differences that tell much about the narrator's characterization of each. The increasing narrative delineation of differences between Saul and David add up to an increased clarity about David through his foil, Saul.

The narrator provides a superb focus on the difference between Saul and David, in the matters of fear and the use of sword and spear, developed in a tight pattern of three stories of the sparing of life which we outlined above. Twice David can kill the

pursuing king, but doesn't. Between those two opportunities comes an occasion in which he is determined to get revenge on a fool who has insulted him—but David is kept from the killing at the last possible moment, and spares the offender's life. For perhaps the first time in the narrative, we get a picture of David's interior, his motivations—nothing if not a complex affair.


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4

David Spares an Enemy, Three Times in a Row

Pattern 6

In the middle of flight from Saul, which I have explored in chapter 3, David twice has the opportunity to take the king's life but does not do so. Between these paralleled scenes, David spares the life of another enemy, a fool, but not before he is spared from his own worst instincts through the agency of a wise and beautiful woman. In these three linked accounts we are offered a display of what appears to be David's capacity for combining political savvy with a surprising morality and genuine devotion to God.

1. *Sparing a Foolish King: Genuine Devotion, Political Savvy (I, 24)*
2. *Spared from His Own Worst Instincts, David Spares a Fool (I, 25)*
3. *Sparing a Foolish King: A Political Savvy That Is Genuinely Pious (I, 26)*

1. Sparing a Foolish King: Genuine Devotion, Political Savvy (I, 24)

David eludes the thrown spear of Saul, twice; escapes out a window; flees—and flees and flees. In the middle of this narrative sequence of flight we find Saul and David together for the first time—in a cave![1]

Saul is closing in on David and his small band of hangers-on who have found refuge in a cave. The king comes into the very same cave, to defecate.[2] His vastly superior forces wait.

As the physical distance between pursuer and pursued has narrowed, so, too, the text's rather distant perspective on David gives way to a closer view of the man and his motives. From the intense drama of this cave scene, something essential about David's character comes to light.

Saul has an elite force of three thousand men, David six hundred rogues. Narrative tension—particularly in the case of a story acted out by a skilled storyteller—is at its greatest point so far. The king is in a most preoccupied and vulnerable state. Wielding an implement of war, David approaches the squatting Saul and . . . cuts off a piece of the garment covering the king's feet![3]

Slipping back to the cave's recesses, David must face his bloodthirsty men. They are a band of desperados—all those who were "in distress . . . in debt . . . discontented" (I, 22:2).They have said, "Here is the day of which the Lord said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do what seems good to you' " (I, 24:4). But now, David has returned with only a cut-off piece of royal garment to show for his daring move to the front of the cave.

David needs to rein his men in, emphatically: "So David scolded his men severely and did not permit them to attack Saul" (I, 24:7). David has restrained himself and his men from eliminating a murderous enemy—an obstacle to the throne David possibly seeks. With this admonition to his bloodthirsty men, the devotee of God might well be exhibiting not only the height of moral action, but political acumen as well: if he, David, is to become Israel's next king, the Lord's anointed, then his comportment toward would-be murderer King Saul is significant—however at risk David and his men are. In fact, David feels seriously stricken with even this cutting of the royal garment (I, 24:3–5). He practices what he preaches to his men, even while offering a future mandate should he become king.

How badly does David want the throne, or expect it? We never find out if David knew what was happening in the secretive anointing service Samuel performed under the God-inspired ruse of offering sacrifice (I, 16:1–3; 11–13). Because "the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward" (I, 16:13), we assume that David had a sense of a portentous destiny, if not an understanding of his anointing by God as Israel's future king. And we have witnessed David's being mightily interested in the reward for killing Goliath, namely, the hand of the king's daughter, marrying into the royal family (I, 17:24–30). If indeed,"the Lord's anointed," David would want the word spread that lifting even a finger against the Lord's anointed is not to be tolerated.

Neither Saul nor the narrator comments on the possible political savvy behind David's sparing of Saul, the Lord's anointed. We are left to wonder if perhaps the lad who inquired about the reward for killing Goliath is preparing his own God-anointed way. If so, we have acumen wedded to genuine devo-

tion before the God of this story. At this point, we can't be sure about either David's devotion to God or his political craftiness, but by the third instance of sparing an enemy, the audience is more clear.

The careful listener has come to expect quite a range of possibility in the narrative, but nothing equals the tension here between possible regicide and a royal vulnerability tinged with the scatological. The comic element—comic relief—indicates a dramatic resolution to, or reprieve from, the immediate tension, an assurance that things will work out between David and Saul in David's favor. The eighth son has been shown to be both God's and the narrator's favorite. The king is shown being brought literally down low, squatting, and subject to a superior warrior's instrument of death. David is on the rise, from a narrative point of view. We are gaining at least an introductory certainty about who David is: his right choosing is of the highest and rarely-to-be-seen caliber.

And the story's implicit moral vision is coming into clearer view. In the programmatic prayer of Hannah, from the story's opening sequence, we have heard a moral perspective regarding God's reversal of lowly and mighty, and the connection between such reversal and the Lord's anointed:

> The bows of the mighty are broken,
> but the feeble gird on strength. . . . (I, 2:4)
> The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
> he brings low, he also exalts
> He raises up the poor from the dust;
> he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
> to make them sit with princes
> and inherit a seat of honor. . . . . (I, 2:7–8)
> He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
> but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;
> for not by might does one prevail.
> The Lord will judge the ends of the earth;
> he will give strength to his king,
> and exalt the power of his anointed. (I, 2:9–10)

The echoing of this prayer in the drama of the cave episode is conspicuous. David is lowly, generally in a poor way: we are led to expect his rise. King Saul, most prominent in all of Israel, is at his physical and figurative lowest in the story up to this point. God brings low, God raises up. But in the narrative ahead, Saul and David themselves are shown as agents of their respective declines and exaltations, God assisting in the rising but also in the bringing down.

Later, outside the cave, David engages Saul. From across a ravine, David waves the piece of Saul's cut garment, calling out to the departing king. So exceptional is David's restraint as to take Saul by weeping surprise, bringing the king home to himself: " 'Is that your voice, my son David?' And Saul wept aloud" (I, 24:16). Israel's reigning king has a rare moment of self-understanding, an acknowledgment of a flawed self: " 'You are upright and I am not,' he said to David, 'since you have behaved well to me, whereas I have behaved badly to you. . . . When a man comes on his enemy, does he let him go unmolested?' " (I, 24:17–19, NJB). Any earlier laughter at the plight of a mighty king sitting low, easy prey to an outflanked and fleeing David, turns to an astonishment expressed by the king himself. Surprise in this narrative occurs at the level of quotidian action, the hunted-down confronting the unsuspecting hunter at the moment of the latter's greatest point of vulnerability. But the surprise, more importantly, informs the realm of morality and politics. David exhibits a rare goodness combined with shrewd political sense, both of which Saul conspicuously lacks.

When a man comes on his enemy, does he let him go unmolested? Surprise, shock, tears, and rare self-recognition: in discovering his own answer to the question *who is David,* Saul has been illumined about himself.

2. Spared from His Own Worst Instincts, David Spares a Fool (I, 25)

Between the sparing scene in the cave and one of a paralleled sparing of King Saul in an open field at night, we find sandwiched a scene in which the previously moral David barely escapes from his own murderous vindictiveness—just in time to spare the fool he has set out to kill.

In their flight from Saul, David and his outcast band of men have been doing what they can to survive. They have acted as guardians of Nabal's livestock and shepherds, fending off other roaming ruffians. As David sees it, he and Nabal have enjoyed, mutually, a protection scheme: David and his outlaws protect Nabal's holdings from marauding bands of men in expectation of returned favor, namely, that the rich herder will provide needed sustenance for David and his men.

When emissaries from David approach the wealthy herder at festival time for the payoff of food, they are rebuffed, rudely. "Who is David?" asks Nabal ("fool" in the Hebrew, as his wife will intimate [I, 25:25]). "Who is the son of Jesse?" continues the foolish one. Nabal's taunt, ironically, expresses a question at the heart of the narrative's drama (I, 25:10).

David is capable of ascribing to himself, perhaps with rhetorical flourish, a rather low status: "On whose trail are you in hot pursuit?" he has asked Saul. "On the trail of a dead dog! On the trail of a single flea!" (I, 24:15) David repeats this rather circumspect self-devaluation to Saul in the paralleled episode (I, 26:20). But when it comes from someone else. . . . Hearing of Nabal's belittling question, David has his men buckle on their swords, and they all start on down the mountain to wipe out Nabal and his household.

Abigail, her husband's opposite, is lovely and intelligent. She hears of Nabal's response to David's request. Without letting her husband know, Abigail makes her peacemaking way toward David, with the supplies asked for.

Through clever narration—a flashback—the gross and vicious motivations of David appear in immediate juxtaposition with the graciousness of this woman.

> [Abigail] was riding on the donkey coming down under the cover of the mountain, and look, David and his men were coming down toward her, and she met him. David had said [back at the buckling-up scene], "All in vain did I guard everything that belonged to that fellow in the wilderness, and nothing was missing from all that was his, and he paid me back evil for good! Thus may God do to David and even more [i.e., something close to *I'll be God-damned*], if I leave from all that is until morning a single pisser against the wall!" (I, 25:20–22)[4]

"On this occasion," Robert Pinsky notes, "David's thinking is in the vocabulary and spirit of a hardened brigand or guerilla leader: 'If I leave all of that pertain to him by the morning light any that pisseth to the wall.' [KJV] That is, this harsh poetry means that David intends to kill every male of the household."[5] In the Hebrew, "pisser" is put at the end of the sentence, highlighting both the prior defecating of Saul and, here, David's scatological crudity—along with his oath-taking.

The flashback—*David had said*—provides a perfect contrast to Abigail's demeanor. David's words hang in the narrative air just as a woman shows up. "And so she was riding the donkey coming down under the cover of the mountain, and look, David and his men were coming down toward her, and she met them. And David had said . . ." (I:25:20–21)[6] *What David had said* is to be contrasted with what follows, as the above juxtaposition indicates. The encounter is exquisitely balanced. Here, the beautiful, intelligent, eloquent woman; here the murderous foul-mouth David. Abigail speaks grace-filled words, a word of God to David:

> "My lord, do not take seriously this ill-natured fellow, Nabal; for as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name, and folly is with him; but I, your servant, did not see the young men of my lord, whom you sent. Now then, my lord, as the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, since the Lord has restrained you from bloodguilt and from taking vengeance with your own hand, now let your enemies and those who seek to do evil to my lord be like Nabal. And now let this present that your servant has brought to my lord be given to the young men who follow my lord. Please forgive the trespass of your servant; for the Lord will certainly make my lord a sure house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the Lord; and evil shall not be found in you so long as you live. If anyone should rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living under the care of the Lord your God; but the lives of your enemies he shall sling out as from the hollow of a sling."
> (I, 25:25–29)

Abigail's words are filled with sweetness and light—and a heightened moral sensibility. With a prophetic eye, one that reflects the early poem by Hannah, she envisions the Lord's deliverance of the upright, and divine doom for evildoers, including her boorish husband. David listens, thanks Abigail, and turns back from his murderous intentions. Intent to kill Goliath, David uses a sling, echoed in Abigail's assurance.

Abigail returns home that night to her fool of a husband. (In the following episode of David's sparing his life yet again, King Saul will say, "I have been a fool" [I, 26:21]). Nabal has been partying "like a king." Nabal is drunk, so Abigail must wait for morning to tell him of the meeting with David. Immediately, Nabal experiences a ten-day swoon—"he became like stone"—and dies (I, 25:37).

Just prior to Abigail's appearance, we have heard David inveighing against this fool who "has paid me back evil for good." The words occur in a narrative echo chamber:

- Saul has said to David, "You are more righteous than I; for *you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil*" (I, 24:17).
- Nabal, David claims, has *paid back evil for good* (I, 25:21).
- When David hears that Nabal is dead, he says, "Blessed be the Lord who has judged the case of Nabal's insult to me, and has *kept back his servant from evil; the Lord has returned the evil-doing of Nabal upon his own head*" (25:39).

Genuine evil and good are a part of this story's moral universe. Its main characters participate in a drama comprised of such matters as considering response to the paying back evil with evil, or with good—or good with evil. But perhaps, one might argue, David has no right in the first place to associate "evil" with Nabal's actions and "good" with his own. Perhaps, as some have thought, this is all a nasty protection racket, with David seeking out Nabal for extortion purposes, or even seeking Nabal's death in order to marry Abigail.[7] The text and its context of the triadic pattern suggest otherwise, urging serious consideration of this key motif of evil-for-good and good-for-evil. A member of the Nabal party knows firsthand what David and his men have given his master Nabal, a narrative fact which argues against any possibility of viewing David's actions as sinister: here is protection in exchange for sustenance, a win-win scenario:

> But one of the young men told Abigail, Nabal's wife, "David sent messengers out of the wilderness to salute our master; and he shouted insults at them. Yet the men were very good to us, and we suffered no harm, and we never missed anything when we were in the fields, as long as we were with them; they were a wall to us both by night and by day, all the while we were with them keeping the sheep. Now therefore know this and consider what you should do; for evil has been decided against our master and against all his house; he is so ill-natured that no one can speak to him." (I, 25:14–17)

Evil has been decided against our master, but David must not be the agent of that evil. Do not return evil for evil, the text here suggests: that is God's business. Rather, return good for evil. King Saul weeps in shock at the strangeness of such.

David has stopped his campaign of murderous vindication because of a woman whose godly perspective he accepts. That Abigail is wise and beautiful presumably does not hurt the capacities for listening that David demonstrates. David has spared the life of a lethal enemy, a king; now he spares someone he would go after, vengefully. To miss this narrative unfolding of David's character is to ignore depths of character: David's capacity for a surprising morality and devotion to God, which later in the text will find its shadow side.[8]

Nabal is struck down, leaving David free to woo, successfully, the lovely and intelligent Abigail—who has asked to be remembered should David be favored by God (I, 25:39, 31). From the episode's fairytale-like charm emerges a critical moral issue: do not ever shed blood wantonly; guard yourself from taking revenge, even on a foolish scoundrel (I, 25:30–31). Far from Abigail's "seducing" David and David's absconding with her,[9] this episode in context

reveals the worst of David being corrected by the best of someone the narrator calls intelligent, a woman whose words suggest an implicit moral vision that includes a challenge that goes beyond the mere facing and felling of a giant.

In the story ahead, beginning especially with the business of adultery and murderous cover-up, David will be shown taking innocent blood under the worst of circumstances and with the worst of motives. His wrongdoing will be highlighted for many chapters, with all the attending and horrific consequences for family and nation. But even at his worst, we will also find David's willingness to heed Abigail's most significant moral lesson. A certain Shimei belittles the king most horribly, for example, as David flees his son Absalom. A warrior friend urges revenge on Shimei. "Let him alone and let him curse," cautions David; "it may be that the Lord will look on my distress, and the Lord will repay me with good for this cursing of me today" (II, 16:5–14). Not evil for evil, but possible good for restraint from evil: such demeanor is remarkable for anyone, let alone a king. Far from the view of David's turn-around as "inevitable" or "lucky,"[10] when understood within the context of the triad pattern of sparing and of such repetitious detail as David's response to Shimei, the character and action of this king-to-be is an exemplary instance of true repentance.

Patterns of repetition yield clues: in this sixth pattern, we are presented with a David who twice spares a royal enemy seeking his life, as well as sparing a loutish enemy who has slighted David's name and deprived him and his men of provisions. In sparing Saul's life a second time, as we see next, David goes out of his way to highlight his devotion to God and his respect for the king—an action of sparing that promotes David's political agenda.

3. Sparing a Foolish King: A Political Savvy That Is Genuinely Pious (I, 26)

The echoing scene of David sparing King Saul is less dramatic than the first and more polemic, a moral-tale with a point to emphasize. David himself is shown making the point, making sure that the king and all his warriors understand David's respect for the Lord's anointed. He goes out of his way—and puts himself in harm's way—to make a point of sparing the king.

Immediately following his encounter with Abigail and sparing of Nabal, David is on the run again from Saul and his "three thousand chosen men of Israel" (I, 26:1–2). But then David decides to pay Saul and his troops a visit.

The narrative staging is quite different from the first scene. In the first, David retreats from harm into a darkened cave; in the second, he advances in moonlight toward Saul, his troops, and what certainly looks like trouble.

> Saul encamped on the hill of Hachilah, which is opposite Jeshimon beside the road. But David remained in the wilderness. When he learned that Saul came after him into the wilderness, David sent out spies, and learned that Saul had indeed arrived. Then David set out and came to the place where Saul had encamped; and David saw the place where Saul lay, with Abner son of Ner, the commander of his army. Saul was lying within the encampment, while the army was encamped around him.
>
> Then David said to Ahimelech the Hittite, and to Joab's brother Abishai son of Zeruiah, "Who will go down with me into the camp to Saul?"
>
> Abishai said, "I will go down with you."
>
> So David and Abishai went to the army by night; there Saul lay sleeping within the encampment, with his spear stuck in the ground at his head; and Abner and the army lay around him.
>
> Abishai said to David, "God has given your enemy into your hand today; now therefore let me pin him to the ground with one stroke of the spear; I will not strike him twice."
>
> But David said to Abishai, "Do not destroy him; for who can raise his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless?"
>
> David said, "As the Lord lives, the Lord will strike him down; or his day will come to die; or he will go down into battle and perish. The Lord forbid that I should raise my hand against the Lord's anointed. (I, 26:3–11)

Why does David take the chance?

This is a morality play: a serious point is being made, and every narrative detail must serve that point. We find David repeating twice, to Abishai his champion, what he has already said to his small band of men, in the cave:

- "Who can raise his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless?" (26:9).
- "The Lord forbid that I should raise my hand against the Lord's anointed; but now take the spear that is at his head, and the water jar, and let us go." (26:11)
- He said to his men, "The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord's anointed, to raise my hand against him; for he is the Lord's anointed." (24:6)

King Saul may be a lost cause for David, but there are the troops, both his own and Saul's. David first cautions his rash comrade Abishai, who wishes to use

the king's own spear against him. "Who can raise his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless?" (26:9) and "As the Lord lives, the Lord will strike him down; or his day will come to die; or he will go down into battle and perish. The Lord forbid that I should raise my hand against the Lord's anointed" (I, 26:10–11). After making himself perfectly clear to Abishai, David calls out to Saul's commander Abner.

> Then David went over to the other side, and stood on top of a hill far away, with a great distance between them. David called to the army and to Abner son of Ner, saying, "Abner! Will you not answer?"
>
> Then Abner replied, "Who are you that calls to the king?"
>
> David said to Abner, "Are you not a man? Who is like you in Israel? Why then have you not kept watch over your lord the king? For one of the people came in to destroy your lord the king. This thing that you have done is not good. As the Lord lives, you deserve to die, because *you have not kept watch over your lord, the Lord's anointed.* See now, where is the king's spear, or the water jar that was at his head?" (I, 26:13–16; emphasis mine)

What looks like David's staging of this whole affair—the narrator's staging of that staging—helps to drive home the more embedded point of the first episode: keep your hands off the Lord's anointed. David regales Abner for being so careless as to let a would-be assassin come close to the Lord's anointed, the king. Later in the story, we find the same Abner rallying all of Israel behind David (II, 3:12–21).

In the first account, David calls out to Saul after the sparing; here, he calls out to everyone except Saul. In the first instance, the point is made to his own renegade band of men—with a plea to Saul to lay off. But in the second, having despaired perhaps of changing Saul's maniacal mind, David's point about not touching the Lord's anointed is made not to his own men but to Saul's troops.

In the first cave-darkened scene, meaning is embedded—buried—within very tense drama. Here in the echoing scene, out on the field, the meaning is explicit, out there on the open plain, in full moonlight before Saul's troops. This less highly charged drama of this echoing episode (not all see it this way)[11] accentuates the moral point, serving a moral lesson always on view.

David has taken Saul's spear and water jug; in the aftermath, there is "a great distance between them." In the first episode, in the debriefing after the sparing in the cave, Saul and David are so close that when the pursued speaks, bowed with his face to earth, the king is able to hear by merely looking behind him (I, 24:16).[12] The sense of closeness and heightened drama, in the first

episode is accentuated by Saul's weeping, diminishing the psychic space between the two: David addresses Saul as "my father," while Saul calls out "to my son David" (I, 24:11, 16). Everything in the second, echoing scene, is presented as from a distant perspective, dispassionately—Saul calls out, again, to his "son," but we hear no "father" from David. The first account is filled with such tense action and unexpected reversals as to evoke genuine surprise and, presumably, the laughter of released tension. David's narrow escape from Saul turns into a courageous if impromptu harangue from David. But in the echoing episode we find no sense of escape at all, but rather its opposite, a venturing forth by David, followed by a studied proclamation. The shift in dramatic tone and structure from the first sparing of Saul to this paralleled instance—two sources, perhaps—is far from random, or "curious."[13]

After David has addressed his own commander Abishai and Saul's commander Abner and Abner's troops, Saul responds: "Is this your voice, my son David?" David answers, "It is my voice, my lord, O king"—and then goes on to plead that Saul not allow his servant's (David's) blood to fall on ground "away from the presence of the Lord" (I, 26:17–20). Saul appears haunted by the conspicuous absence of this God, while David is shown to be always aware of, and blessed by, this presence (even in the darkness of God's extraordinarily harsh discipline, as I will show later). David preaches, as it were, not only in the presence of Saul and his troops but also in the presence of the Lord to which he refers.

With this evocation of divine presence, under the light of the moon and with the clarity of David's speech, Saul comes to himself as never before. "I have done wrong," Saul acknowledges to David this second time, after having confessed similar wrongdoing in the prior scene—along with recognizing David's inevitable reign as king.

But there is much more. "I have been a fool," Saul adds, "and have made a great mistake" (I, 26:21). Not *God has abandoned me, has given me an evil spirit;* rather, *I myself have done wrong, I myself have been a fool, I myself have made a great mistake*. Highlighting the king's own words and underscoring prior assessments both explicit and implicit, the narrator disallows Saul (or the audience) to pin the king's problem on God.[14] In Saul's clearheaded confession to being "a fool," we hear an echo of the preceding episode about Nabal, fool.

In the cave episode, the dramatic emphasis has been on an apparent devotion to God: David's heart is stricken by even the cutting-off of a patch from the king's robe, while at the same time we notice the political wisdom of David's announcing his respect for "the Lord's anointed." But in this present account, the dramatic emphasis shifts in no uncertain terms to David's respect of "the Lord's anointed," a politically important point David seems almost to have

discovered there in the cave, and is now keen to declaim before Saul's commanders, warriors, and Saul himself.

By means of the third sparing story, the narrator emphasizes David's anticipation of his own ascendancy to the throne as "the Lord's anointed" against whom no one should lift a hand. David's good political sense is underscored by what he and his right-hand man undertake as a risky venture. The implicit contrast with King Saul and his political waywardness in chasing after David, his best warrior, is hard to miss.

After David admonishes the king's guards for carelessness in protecting God's anointed, Saul asks matter-of-factly exactly the question asked back in the first sparing episode: "Is that your voice, *my son David?*" Saul's calling David "my son" is repeated. Absent, here, is any echo of David's calling Saul "my father," as happened in the first episode of sparing ("see, *my father,*" David had said, "see the corner of your cloak in my hand" I, 24:11). Again: the first scene suggests the high drama of focused closeness—the diminishing of physical space, emotional intimacy and response, and even the familial. In the repeated episode David addresses the king as "my lord" from what is specified as a great distance—significant physical separation. In Saul's mind, David remains a son, a note that will be played several ways in the following narrative. But in David's mind, from this narrative point on, there is only the fleeing and waiting; there is no more of Saul as possible "father." In fact, David will take up with the Philistine enemy of Saul and Israel, albeit without helping this enemy and without harming Israel.

As the story unfolds around the mystery of who David is, reminders of why Saul was rejected and abandoned by God accumulate. Able to recognize the potential of his "son" David, Saul nevertheless pursues the youth with mad jealousy. Eli, Samuel, and David are very poor fathers (more on this in chapters 6 and 7), but not one acts so perversely as "father" Saul to this one he calls "son." As we have seen and will continue to see, the unfolding story does not allow the audience to view Saul as victim,[15] and in fact goes to great length to display David himself as a victim of the foolishness to which Saul confesses. The king is able to measure himself against the man God had said was "a better man." Saul himself is coming to understand why, and in what way. David and Saul serve as foils for each other in the narrative, but here Saul himself confesses to the starkness of contrast between himself and David The major portion of judgment, uttered by a very moved Saul in the story of the first sparing, is assumed by David in the paralleled account: "The Lord rewards everyone for his righteousness and his faithfulness; for the Lord gave you into my hand today, but I would not raise my hand against the Lord's

anointed" (I, 26:23). The moral insight is now clear, even to the inattentive listener: however normal, revenge is not—even in the case of an enemy who is a fool, like Nabal—a matter for humans to decide on and execute. Those working in partnership with God must not initiate a return of evil for evil—particularly in the case of the Lord's anointed. The first account of David's sparing Saul dramatized the point; the middle sequence, concerning Nabal, extends the point; the third scene stresses the point through a more dramatically detached perspective than that of the first or the second.

What we were left wondering about after the first David-Saul episode is answered by the echoing episode: David's devotion to God is, indeed, political—while no less genuine for that.

Perhaps God's heart delights in David because he can honor God and think politically at the same time. It appears that God does not appreciate a deranged thought process that pits a king against his best warrior. Partnership with God: in the context of wishing to be remembered by David, Abigail has let David know of his God-assigned role as prince, *nagid,* a "designate" of God: "When the Lord has done to my lord according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you prince over Israel. . . ." (I, 25:30). *Appointed [as] prince over Israel:* the stakes for David, for God, and for God's people Israel are high. After all, the faithfulness of God is centered on the fixed goal of Israel's good. So much rests on the ruler-designate. Leader of the people as per God's desire, Saul fails in escalating fashion: Israel flounders and God's purpose is thwarted.

David is committed, apparently, to becoming king and ensuring that no Israelite, not even the commanders and troops of Saul, seriously counters "the Lord's anointed"—even though this anointed one may not be from the house of Saul. David has been shown maneuvering his way into the royal family by claiming the reward for killing Goliath, and now he further exhibits political foresight. Does God simply make David king, after the secret anointing through Samuel? Does God ever do everything for David without David's doing what he can, which includes asking for help? Take the Nabal-Abigail episode. It is possible to read this scene as an example of God's unilateral intervention on behalf of David, sparing him through Abigail from having blood on his hands.[16] But as we have seen, although Abigail plays a pivotal role in David's turning back from vindictive slaughter and bloodguilt, it is nonetheless David himself who must turn back. God is able, presumably, to inspire Abigail (who is intelligent) with the proper word, but it is not God unilaterally turning David around, nor Abigail: David himself must repent of (turn around from) his deadly purpose and go back home, trusting in God's care. Such is always the

case in this story: David goes so far, asks God for direction, gets it, and then moves on. Or, when David goes in completely the wrong direction and is confronted, he almost always responds in such a way as to move in a different and better direction. Looking at patterns of repetition, we find, as Jan-Wim Wesselius suggests, a simultaneous interaction of human and divine will and action—differing levels of perspective—that results in a very complex yet coherent drama.[17]

So far so good the audience might think about our young hero. But perhaps such honoring of God and counterintuitive morality as we have seen in this triad of stories of the sparing of an enemy's life are so rare as to be, as it were, a sport of nature—something impossible for David to maintain. Indeed, David is to fail miserably, both in terms of honoring God and in terms of needless—indeed criminal—shedding of another's blood. But for now, a high standard has been set. To not kill a dangerous or insulting enemy is a grand moral gesture, but even more unusual is David's quality of receiving, from an unauthorized and unexpected source like Abigail, words of wisdom. The willingness to be open to such wisdom when it implicates one's self is extraordinary. Something here is an aspect of what God presumably saw in David, something not readily available to human perception and judgment (I, 16:6–7). And on the opposite side of character possibility is David's capacity for taking initiative. In the echoing instance of David's sparing Saul, we find David venturing into enemy territory to make his moral and political point, yet another narrative example of his initiative-taking that was introduced to us in his venturing forth to kill the giant. A complex blend of attributes are revealed in this triad of stories of sparing an enemy's life. By now we are beginning to see the kind of king God chooses the second time around. David is shown to be someone ready for action, undeterred by normally perceived obstacles; someone, also, who is ready to wait, to receive, to refrain from reckless action.

Conclusion

Interrupting David's flight from King Saul, these three connected stories have highlighted the youth's extremes of impetuous ruthlessness and controlled restraint, helping to reinforce the multiple possibilities on view in the introduction: a listener and a talker, a receiver and a taker.

In his first meeting with Saul, as we recall, David is receptive and responsive. He says nothing. He does nothing, except when asked. His skilled way with a lyre calms a distraught king. In twice sparing the murderous Saul,

David's capacity to wait and to receive and to serve astounds all who surround him, including his own renegade followers and the king himself. From such small narrative detail, heard within a pattern of repetition, emerge story meanings. In addition to this receptivity and sensitivity of spirit, however, there is a taking charge. Clearly, in his second sparing of Saul, David is all initiative: words, action, scheme—all in order to prove his capacity to wait, to do nothing! In the cave scene, David elects to creep toward the squatting king, an action so risky as to seem impulsive and crazy. But his waiting, a refusal to take counter-action to the king's murderous ways, is even more bizarre, counterintuitive, and astonishing. The contrast of the second account of sparing Saul with the first heightens our sense of David's paradoxical combination of aggressive reticence.

Vastly complicating the tensions within David's character, between a good receptivity that can wait and an initiative that cannot, is the downside of both the receptivity and the initiative-taking. The good quality of waiting and receptivity will be shown to have a dark side, in an indulgent love of sons that renders David incapable of taking disciplinary action, while his marvelous initiative will prove to have a shadow side of personal indulgence, bedding Bathsheba and having her husband killed for purposes of cover-up. Such self-indulgent initiative nearly caused David great harm in the Nabal episode—and in fact does bring dire consequences to David in following incidents.

But so far, the narrator has given us someone who, in a single endeavor, can do simultaneously what might prove good for himself, for a nation, and for God. In the repeated David-Saul account, we might see moral progress, as one fine reader notes: (1) David does not violate the king's person in the second episode by anything like cutting off a piece of the royal garment, and (2) the lesson about bloodshed and vengeance, leaving such to God, is reinforced by the middle episode with Nabal and Abigail.[18]

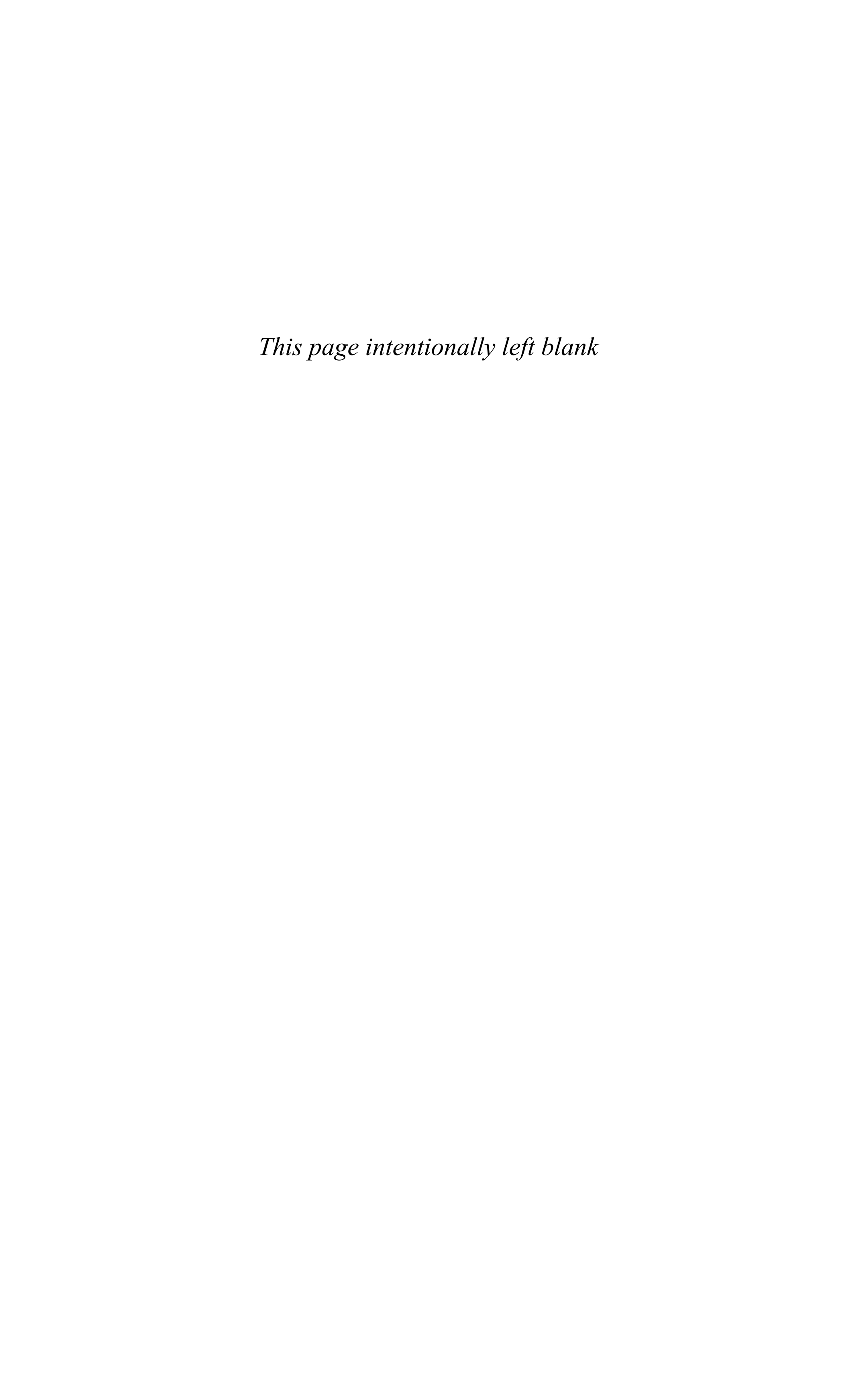
David appears to be devoted to God, generous to a murderous enemy, and politically savvy: the text's answer to who David is will include quite a range of possible motivation, action, and restraint.[19] David's trust in the story's God is a plausible explanation, at this point in the narrative, for both his glorious restraint and his breathtaking initiative. To let an enemy be spared, risking future harassment or death, might seem a hopelessly naive ideal in the political arena. But for David, returning good for evil may make for the best politics, and certainly advertising the inadvisability of lifting a hand against the Lord's anointed represents shrewd foresight.

But the politics is grounded in the good. Even Saul has come to recognize the truth: "You are more righteous than I," he says to David; "For who has ever found an enemy, and sent the enemy away safely?" (I, 24:17, 19)

Pattern Six: David Spares Enemies, Three Times (I, 24–26)

	DAVID SPARES SAUL (I Samuel 24: the Cave)	DAVID (barely) SPARES A FOOL (NABAL) (I Samuel 25)	DAVID SPARES SAUL (I Samuel 26: Open Plain)
Abuse	"I have not sinned against you," claims David, "though you are hunting me to take my life"	David has guarded the property of Nabel very well; Nabal refuses his protector food, adding verbal insults.	Saul: "I have done wrong"—"I have been a fool . . . sadly in the wrong."
No Revenge	*Defecating Saul*: spared by David.	*Pissing men* . . . . . . "are as good as dead."	*Sleeping Saul*: David refrains.
David's Responses	David to his men: 'The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to [kill] my lord, the LORD'S anointed. . . ."	"Thus may God do to David and even more if I leave from all that is until morning a single pisser against the wall!" (R. Alter translation). "He has returned me evil for good."	"Do not destroy [Saul];" "who can raise his hand against the LORD'S anointed, and be guiltless?"
Saul's, Nabal's Responses	"[Saul] said to David, 'You are more righteous than I; for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil.'"	(Nabal had said): "Who is David? Who is this son of Jesse?"	Saul: "I have done wrong. . . . "I have been a fool."
REVENGE IS GOD'S	"May the LORD judge" "May the LORD avenge me on you; but my hand shall not be against you," says David to Saul.	" . . . since the LORD has restrained you from bloodguilt and from taking vengeance with your own hand. . . . " About ten days Nabal struck dead.	"David said, 'As the LORD lives, the LORD will strike him down; or his day will come to die . . . ' "

The narrative stage is set—more than ready—for the entrance of David as Israel's greatest, if massively flawed, king. We now witness the greatness of David's kingship through the lens of a pattern involving the ark, a symbol and reality of God's presence in Israel. David's role in this four-part pattern provides further elaboration of his character, a lessening of his mystery, if not complexity.



5

The Ark, Communal Well-being, and Women

Pattern 7

The ark makes a significant appearance in five major sequences within the broader David story, including the critical last episode of Judges and the culmination of Israel's well-being in the high days of David's house, under Solomon. At the end of Judges, at the worst of times within Israel—"when there was no king"—the ark, ineffectual, appears almost as an afterthought of the people (Judg. 19:1–21:25). At the other end, Israel is at its best, and the ark appears as the centerpiece of worship (I Kings 7:51–8:1). Always at stake in the five sequences is the communal well-being, or lack of it, in Israel. In the first four ark sequences, starting with the Judges debacle, women figure prominently as illustrative of communal trouble—or, in the case of David's wife Michal, of what ultimately causes such trouble. Taken together, these five sequences involving the ark indicate the centrality of communal concerns in David's story, and the role of leaders in connection with the ark and the related presence or absence of communal well-being. The two ark appearances involving David (the third and fourth sequences), taken in the context of the ark pattern, bring David's qualifications as Israel's greatest king into increasingly sharp focus.

1. *FRAME: Israel at Its Worst: Ineffectual Ark; Woman in Trouble (Judg. 19:1–21:25)*
2. *Communal Disaster: Lost Ark; Woman in Trouble (I, 4:1–7:2)*
3. *Communal Glory: David Brings Home the Ark; Woman Makes Trouble (II, 6:1–23)*

4. *Communal Disaster; David Flees, Properly Leaves Ark; Women in Trouble (II, 15:7–16:14)*
5. *FRAME: Israel at Its Best: Ark as Centerpiece; No Trouble Anywhere (I Kings 7:51–8:1)*

No object was more sacred for Israel than the ark, an ornate chest with side-rings for carriage by pole—the latter a detail that becomes dramatically important. The ark contained the two tablets of the covenantal agreement between God and Israel, the ten words from God providing for proper communal life and worship of God. On top of the ark were cherubim and a mercy-seat indicating God's presence.

In order for God's intended blessing of communal well-being to be effected, Israel was to obey the Ten Commandments.[1] Hence "the ark of the covenant": God's intentions for a two-way relationship with Israel, toward God's primary goal of communal *shalom* and ultimately, through Israel, blessing to all peoples on earth (Gen. 12:3; I Kings 8:41–43).[2]

With the ark is found the altar. Sacrifices of communal well-being play an important role in this story, as do sacrifices seeking God's mercy.[3] Critically, David and God end up alone, together, in the very last scene of II Samuel, at the future site of the Temple which will house the ark. What David has, before God, is the altar.

Early in I Samuel priests desecrate the altar sacrifices, leading to the ark being captured by enemies. (Traditional biblical scholars commonly refer to this long sequence as "the ark narrative.") This story of the Philistines' capture of the ark and its partial recovery serves as a narrative follow-up to the communal chaos in late Judges and as a narrative precursor to an episode involving the ark's return under King David and a reestablished Israel at a high point of its communal well-being. But then David stumbles badly and there is civil war in Israel, with David in flight from his treasonous son. He chooses, properly, to leave the ark behind, in Jerusalem. Finally, under David's son Solomon, the ark is gloriously housed in the Temple, along with the altar: communal well-being is at its very best in the represented history of Israel.

1. Beginning Frame: Israel at Its Worst: Ineffectual Ark—Woman in Trouble (Judg. 19:1–21:25)

An Israelite woman is gang-raped by Israelites, and dies as a result. The incident leads to tribe fighting tribe. The ark is brought—a very rare appearance

(not once in Judges until now); sacrifices are made on the altar, a godly priest is present. All to no avail, so outrageous is Israelite behavior.

"There was no king in Israel" is stated twice by the narrator, framing the horror (Judg. 19:1; 21:25). Under the judges, chaos rules in Israel. Without a king, "all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (I, 21:25).

What was right in their own eyes: vision, the matter of seeing properly, is a motif in the David story that becomes especially prominent in the ark episodes. Later, we hear that Eli is going blind, and still later we find that Samuel the seer can't see very well in the anointing of David. Earlier, we have heard that Samson was blinded (Judg. 16:21).

Mayhem, realized most graphically in the case of a raped and murdered woman, rules at all levels of Israelite society—individual, familial, tribal, and national (Judg. 20:7). In spite of God's directive, a righteous priest serving at the altar, and the ark, there can be no help for such a people, so the story seems to say.

It all starts with a reconciled Levite and his concubine on their way home. The day is nearly gone, and the pair need lodging. The Israelite town of Benjaminites proves inhospitable; at last the couple finds a host and house. But "some townsmen, scoundrels," pound on the door, demanding the visiting man for the purpose of sexual relations (Judg. 19:22, NJB). The host counters with an offer of his own, his virginal daughter. The guest intervenes, offering his recovered concubine.

These Israelites prove to be, indeed, *scoundrels*—exceptionally wicked persons who are opposed to God.[4] They break the ancient and sacred laws of hospitality, and are self-aggrandizing in a graphically horrendous manner. The consequences of their action are savage civil war and a lose-lose scenario for Israel, with which the book of Judges ends.

The rawness of human indecency among Israelites—exceeding that of the wicked inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah[5]—is captured in the vignette of this woman's torture. The men have their way with her, all night long. "In the morning her master got up, opened the doors of the house, and when he went out to go on his way—without her?—there was his concubine lying at the door of the house, "with her hands on the threshold" (Judg. 19:27). In the last minutes of the night—the text makes the audience fill in the detail indelibly (imagine it told by a good storyteller)—the men have left her ravaged and near-dead at some distance from the house. Just left her. She has managed somehow to crawl back toward her master and has reached the door, or rather, the threshold, since she is collapsed on the ground. And she has died exactly at that spot; her cold hands rest on the threshold over which she had earlier crossed, the sacrifical sexual object of scoundrels.

Her master loads the corpse onto his donkey, later cutting the body into twelve pieces, one for each of the tribes of Israel, as a call to vengeance. What do we imagine his motives to be: Lost property? Pro-forma response for purposes of appearing incensed? Sudden remorse and anger? The text doesn't say, but the detail is important in allowing the man to record a truth for which he himself is responsible. Sending the pieces of corpse, he advises these words as accompaniment: "Has such a thing ever happened since the day that the Israelites came up from the land of Egypt until this day?" (I, 19:30) Indeed.

So far, in all of Judges, there has been no appearance of the ark. Strangely, it soon makes its way into the narrative.

The various tribes assemble, and they inquire of the Lord twice about attacking the skilled warriors of the offending Benjaminite tribe. Twice the people are given the divine go-ahead, only to be horribly slaughtered in battle by their fellow Israelites, the Benjaminites. On both occasions, the devastated tribes weep before the Lord (Judg. 20:18–26). Finally, on the third beseeching of God, the ark is sought. Although there is apparently both recognition and proper employment of the altar and ark, including a good priest, Phineas, devastation follows.[6]

Bloody success of Israelite against Israelite is granted—engineered, it appears—by God (Judg. 20:46–48).[7] Thousands and then thousands more and then still more thousands are killed (Judg. 20:44–45).[8] Even the Benjaminite cities are utterly destroyed, burned. Six hundred male Benjaminites survive. What does it mean that the ark is present, God sought, but there is only continuing mayhem?

The other tribes come to feel sorry for the imminent demise of this tribe from Israel. These six hundred men need wives if the tribe of Benjamin is to survive. But a sacred vow prohibits any giving of wives from within Israel. The solution is to find some Israelites who had failed to heed the original word to assemble for battle against the Benjaminites: a vow had been taken that any who had originally failed to show up for the battle against the Benjaminites should be put to death (I, 21:4). Men from Jabesh-gilead,[9] in fact, had never shown up; further slaughter ensues, more killing of Israelite by Israelite. Jabesh-gilead husbands are killed and their wives obtained for the remnant of Benjaminite men. But Jabesh-gilead men are not the only casualties: those put to the sword "include[ed] the women and the little ones" (Judg. 21:10).

Wives are acquired for those Benjaminites surviving the slaughter, but only four hundred are found for six hundred men. Again: what to do? The vow says no tribe can offer wives to the Benjaminite men. The solution is to steal Israelite women, secreting them away as they dance in worship: technically, then, no

Israelite offered these women—they were kidnapped. The vow is kept, and unseemly things can proceed.

The audience has been prepared for these last horrors: Israelites had been setting up alternatives to the ark and even to the God of Israel, while the narrator has begun the mantra, "there was no king in Israel."[10] Even before the rape and murder of the concubine, the audience is being disposed toward a favorable view of monarchy in Israel—however much Samuel the prophet and even God seem at first to be quite unsure about the prospect.[11]

To what narrative point, then, has the ark made its rare appearance, along with altar sacrifices and the invoking of God's presence by a good priest? With such breakdown of covenantal responsibility and substitution of idols for God, so the narrative logic goes, not even the ark and God's directives can help restore communal well-being.[12] Finding a solution to *there was no king in Israel* takes on, then, a certain urgency. Not even the ark, sacrifices, and God's directives can help any longer in establishing and maintaining communal well-being.

2. Communal Disaster: Lost Ark; Woman in Trouble (II, 2:12–7:2)

As we continue the story, the people of Israel continue to experience great communal ill. They are harassed by the Philistines and exploited by their own leaders. Eli and his two priest-sons share center stage with the young Samuel. (Eli himself is a priest who does the work, also, of judge—continuing the era of judge-ruler.) Eli's sons ravage women, a sexual violation echoing the gang rape of the ineffectual ark account at the end of Judges. Accompanied by Eli's two sons, the ark will be lost in battle. In spite of the promising birth of Samuel, who functions as priest, prophet, and judge (Israel's last),[13] there is no help for Israel's communal ill. Still there is no king.

The first book of Samuel begins with the story of a woman, Hannah, whose barrenness elicits taunting from a rival wife, leading to Hannah's bitterness. At a yearly festival of sacrifices—primarily the communion sacrifice—the mother seeks God's favor, successfully. Samuel is soon born. Eli, priest at Shiloh—the religious center to which Samuel's parents have traveled—becomes the caretaker of the boy Samuel. Hannah has offered the boy to God's service in return for the divine kindness.

Consistently juxtaposed with the righteous Hannah and her son Samuel are the unsavory sons of Eli and Eli himself. In chapter 6 I will explore the details of Eli's failure with his sons, Hophni and Phinehas. Here the focus is on the sons, who will accompany the ark into a disastrous battle in which the ark is captured by the enemy.

These sons have turned out to be, in fact, "scoundrels" (I, 2:12). Priests, they defy God while depriving the people of their share of the communion sacrifice of well-being.[14] In fact, they apparently grab the portion of the food that is saved for God.[15] "The sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the Lord; for they treated the offerings of the Lord with contempt" (I, 2:17). In addition, "they lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting" (I, 2:22).

Soon afterward, we hear of Israel's going to war against the Philistines and being routed. The elders make a suggestion.

> When the troops came to the camp, the elders of Israel said, "Why has the Lord put us to rout today before the Philistines? Let us bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord here from Shiloh, so that he may come among us and save us from the power of our enemies."
>
> So the people sent to Shiloh, and brought from there the ark of the covenant of the Lord of hosts, who is enthroned on the cherubim. The two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were there with the ark of the covenant of God. (I, 4:3–4)

The attentive audience is forewarned: the ark proved ineffectual or even worse, in that last horror of Judges. Under such circumstances, perhaps something even worse can happen.

The Israelites give a great shout at the ark's appearance, and the Philistines are fearful. But the audience has been alerted to the juxtaposition between not only Eli-and-sons and Hannah-and-son but also, now, between failed representatives of God and the ark: "Eli, Hophni and Phinehas . . . were there with the ark of the covenant of God" (I, 4:4).

Waiting for news of battle with the Philistines, Eli sits "on his [judge's] seat beside the gate watching the road, for his heart was trembling for the ark of God" (I, 4:13, NJB).

A decisive battle between Israel and the Philistines has taken place, and we hear of great slaughter among the Israelites, of their defeat, and of the death of Hophni and Phinehas—and that the victorious Philistines have captured "the ark of God" (I, 4:10–11). A messenger comes to Eli with the news.

> When he arrived, Eli was sitting upon his seat by the road watching, for his heart trembled for the ark of God. When the man came into the city and told the news, all the city cried out.
>
> When Eli heard the sound of the outcry, he said, "What is this uproar?" Then the man came quickly and told Eli. Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were set, so that he could not see.

> The man said to Eli, "I have just come from the battle; I fled from the battle today."
>
> He said, "How did it go, my son?"
>
> The messenger replied, "Israel has fled before the Philistines, and there has also been a great slaughter among the troops; your two sons also, Hophni and Phinehas, are dead, and the ark of God has been captured."
>
> When he mentioned the ark of God, Eli fell over backward from his seat by the side of the gate; and his neck was broken and he died, for he was an old man, and heavy. He had judged Israel forty years. (I, 4:13–18)

He had judged Israel forty years: Eli is the penultimate judge in Israel, preceding Samuel.[16] Without a king, still without a king, in the twilight of the judges, Israel suffers its worst conceivable defeat.

As in the ark episode in Judges, here, too, a woman in trouble highlights the chaos and God-forsakenness of Israel:

> Now [Eli's] daughter-in-law, the wife of Phinehas, was pregnant, about to give birth. When she heard the news that the ark of God was captured, and that her father-in-law and her husband were dead, she bowed and gave birth; for her labor pains overwhelmed her.
>
> As she was about to die, the women attending her said to her, "Do not be afraid, for you have borne a son."
>
> But she did not answer or give heed. She named the child Ichabod, meaning, "The glory has departed from Israel," because the ark of God had been captured and because of her father-in-law and her husband.
>
> She said, "The glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured." (I, 4:19–22)

Did you hear that? the narrator insists. At first it is the narrator who quotes the dying woman, *"The glory has departed from Israel,"* adding the commentary *because the ark of God had been captured*. In the repetition—hear this!—the wife of Phineas herself says, "*. . . , for the ark of God has been captured.*" (*The glory has departed from Israel, "for the ark of God has been captured.*") In short, calamitious, unheard of, unthinkable.

The old priest-judge had keeled over dead, not at the news of his sons' death, but "when [the messenger] mentioned the ark of God." Perhaps, as one reader has it, Eli's daughter-in-law dies asking, simply, *Where is the glory gone?*[17]

"[Eli's] heart was trembling for the ark of God," as the New Jerusalem Bible puts it; "he was sitting on his seat beside the gate watching the road," even though "his gaze was fixed; he was blind" (I, 4:13, 15). Eli's physical loss of sight here becomes most obviously a metaphor for spiritual blindness: a lack of literal vision corresponds to Eli's failure of divine perspective. We have been told that there would be one exception to the dying of Eli's promised dynasty—we are not told who—but this priest-judge would be kept at the altar "for his eyes to go blind and his soul to wither" (I, 2:33, NJB). Meanwhile, Eli's own "eyes were beginning to grow dim; he could no longer see. The lamp of God had not yet gone out . . . where the ark of God was" (I, 3:2–3 NJB).

The text does not make explicit what "the lamp of God" actually is. We can assume a literal lamp, kept burning throughout the night in the sanctuary, but much later in the story David will be referred to as "the lamp of Israel" (II, 21:17). And he himself will claim God as his lamp (II, 22:29). That is, *the lamp of God* is claimed by David, in a metaphorical sense, as the light-for-seeing by which he orients his life and worship while in turn his troops consider David himself the lamp of Israel. Eli can't see very well anymore, literally and apposite to the sense in which David claims the lamp of God as a light-for-seeing God's way. The seer is going blind, but the lamp of God has not yet gone entirely out: the hope of its burning and providing apprehension of God's ways is to be realized with King David. We are being prepared for David's role in returning the ark, the glory of God, to Israel—and his *seeing,* as the lamp of Israel and with the help of God, the lamp of Israel.

The fractured nature of the covenant between Israel and God becomes as clear as the palpable loss of the ark. The altar has been desecrated by priests, who are scoundrels, who accompany the ark. The presence of God, symbolized by the ark, is canceled out by the lack of that presence in Israel. The ark can do nothing, and in fact something can be done to the ark.

In the earlier story, there are "scoundrels" who rape women; later, the two priest-sons of Eli are called "scoundrels," and (whether this is consensual sex or not) "they lay with the women who flocked to the entrance of the Tent of the Assembly" (I, 2:22).[18] The story takes us from one raped woman in the ark story in Judges to wanton sex with numerous women in this ark story in I Samuel. And in each episode, a woman in terrible trouble dies tragically. In each, there is a priest Phinehas, and an unavailing ark, and complete societal ruin.

Having departed from Israel, the ark brings death and tumors to the enemy. The Philistines rather quickly send the ark back to Israel, to Beth-shemesh. There, the ark's return is celebrated by altar sacrifices (I, 6:13–16). Ark and altar are present—yet all is not well: "the descendants of Jeconiah did not rejoice"[19] (as, later, David's wife Michal refuses to do), and so the Lord

"killed seventy of them" (I, 6:19). The Beth-shemesh folk want nothing to do with the ark, or with its slaughtering God (I, 6:20),[20] and send messengers to Kiriath-jearim. There the ark ends up in a kind of safe storage, for twenty years, while "all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord" (I, 7:2).

And still, of course, there is no king in Israel. Finally, at Samuel's suggestion that his two corrupt judge-sons rule, the elders of Israel balk, asking Samuel for a king (I, 8:4–5). But is having a king the answer, as the narrator implies? Almost all narrative indicators suggest that at the very least, there seems no viable alternative. And still the ark is not at the center of any significant worship in Israel.

3. Communal Glory: The Ark Returns to the Heart of Israel; Woman Makes Trouble (II, 6:1–23)

Israel gets its king, chosen by God. But King Saul spends almost all of his time—so the narrative emphasizes—chasing his divinely chosen replacement, David, with intent to murder. Failing that and all else, Saul takes his own life. There is still no ark at the center of Israel's worship.

David proceeds to maneuver his way to kingship over Judah and then all the tribes of Israel north of Judah. Cleverly and perhaps sincerely, David unites the people in lamenting the untimely deaths of Saul and Jonathan. A young inept son of Saul is left for the Saulide throne, along with Saul's number one commander, Abner. The latter seeks out David, who forges a peace treaty with Abner. But Abner is treacherously murdered by David's commander, Joab. David publicly mourns Abner's untimely death. Soon thereafter, he leads the people in grieving the murder of Saul's son Ishbaal, king of the northern tribes.

Finally David becomes king, first over the house of Judah, then over all of Israel. God's second choice of king makes good, it appears. One thing is missing. From its cold storage in Kiriath-jearim, David decides to bring the ark to the heart of united Israel, to Jerusalem.[21] On the occasion of its return, the now-united kingdom enjoys its richest communal well-being to date, with appropriate sacrifices.

The timing in David's bringing the ark back into the center of Israel's worshiping life seems appropriate, underscoring the restored communal well-being of all Israel, and the ascendancy of David, shrewd politico and God-devoted one.

As noted, most especially in the pattern of sparing enemies, David's suitability for rule includes a simultaneous craftiness on the one hand and devotion to God on the other. Some have found purely political motives for David's

bringing of the ark to Jerusalem, partially true, surely,[22] but the narrative focus is on the importance and joy on the ark's return to Israel's center of worship: all the people, rejoicing, worship God before the ark, in Jerusalem. Israel is not Israel without God's presence and the covenantal bond between God and the people, objectified or symbolized by the ark. And now the ark is at home, in its new home, Jerusalem.

David dances wildly, with the people shouting, trumpets sounding. "Michal, daughter of Saul," we are told, was watching from a window—all others in Israel have joined in the celebration of the ark. "[Michal] saw King David leaping and dancing before the Lord; and she despised him in her heart" (II, 6:16). The narrator has interrupted the ceremonies with the above note; the story returns to David's presenting "offerings of well-being before the Lord" (II, 6:17). And dessert of sorts, provided by the king: he "distributed food among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins." David blesses all the community of God's people, who then return to their respective homes (II, 6:18–19).

David also returns to his home, "to bless his household" (II, 6:20).[23] As he approaches, "Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David." She forestalls the intended blessing with harsh words regarding the scant clothing of the dancing king: "How the king of Israel honored himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants' maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!" (II, 6:20)

Twice Michal refers to David's physical exposure: *uncovering* and then *uncover*. Here is one source of Michal's ire, an apparent jealousy regarding the maidens surrounding nearly naked David. Michal's father, also, had been mightily concerned about David's standing before the maidens: "Saul has killed his thousands," the women had sung, "but David his ten thousands" (I, 18:7). From father to daughter, though Michal as a wife would seem to have even more reason to be jealous.

Michal's loathing could very well have added dimensions. She has "loved David" (I, 18:20), and lost him to the exigencies of her father's desire to kill David and David's desire not to be killed. Furthermore, Michal's subsequent marriage to a certain Palti, arranged by her father Saul, ends with David's preemptory insistence that Michal be returned to him as he choreographs his rise to the kingship of both Israel and Judah. The new husband's weeping over this forced separation from Michal serves as a reminder of David's possibly ambiguous response to Michal from the very start (II, 3:12–16), and of his rigorous, if not ruthless, political will. He needs the daughter of Saul to help legitimate his claim to the throne.

Finally, in David's rejoinder to Michal's cynicism, we are helpfully reminded of one last source of the wife's profound discontent. Her father's house has lost its chance of a dynasty: God has chosen me, David asserts, *in place of your father and all his household.* "It was before the Lord," David tells Michal, "who chose me in place of your father and all his household, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the Lord, that I have danced before the Lord" (6:21). We know what David says is true, about God's unchoosing of Saul in favor of "a man after [God's] own heart"—someone who, as the text puts it, "is better" than Saul (I, 3:14; 15:28).

The possibility of Michal's politically motivated stance is raised by the narrator, who twice refers to Michal as "daughter of Saul" (II, 6:20, 23). Surely Michal understands that she is witnessing the definitive end of the rule of her father's house. Whatever the circumstances of her anguish—wifely jealously and/or political disappointment—Michal's absence from the celebration of the ark's return, and her subsequent cursing of David, are implicitly condemned.[24]

Ultimately, the text denies any sympathetic reading of Michal's circumstance, however much from a modern point of view the scene smacks of an unseemly chauvinism.[25] We have heard the always reliable narrator tell us, for example, that David's leaping and dancing was *before the Lord,* as witnessed by Michal from an isolated post at an upper window (II, 6:16). David asserts, to Michal, the very same perspective as that of the narrator: "It was *before the Lord,* who chose me in place of your father and all his household, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of the Lord, that I have danced *before the Lord*" (II, 6:21). An apparently chiastic arrangement of the dialogue between Michal and David emphasizes the point, as Nathan Klaus argues.[26]

Bringing home the ark to "the city of David," Jerusalem (II, 5:7), would have been a politically shrewd move, cementing David's consolidation of power in his own city. But such an implicit possibility neither lessens nor qualifies, as some would have it, the point of the king's ecstatic celebration *before the Lord* of the ark's resting place in Jerusalem.[27] However politically motivated, David's largesse toward the people, the narrator tells us, is a blessing of them *in the name of the Lord of hosts* (II, 6:18). All is in place as it should be, the text suggests.

David's repeated claim to Michal that his dancing *was before the Lord . . . I have danced before the Lord"* is a corollary truth to how the faithful prophet Nathan, immediately following, responds to David's desire to build a permanent dwelling for the ark.

> Now when the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, the king said to the

> prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; *for the Lord is with you*." (II, 6:23–7:3; emphasis mine)

The narrator assures the audience that it is the Lord who "had given [David] rest from all his enemies around him," followed by the related words of Nathan, "the Lord is with you." Here is a picture of the covenantal relationship, demonstrated on the human side by dance. *The Lord is with [David],* and David *danced before the Lord*.

Just a bit later in the narrative, against the backdrop of word concerning Michal's inability to bring life into the world, we find Nathan reporting God's word to David. While prohibiting the king from building this house for the ark, God gives assurances that David's "house" will thrive in conjunction with—for the purpose of—Israel's being "planted," living "in their own place" and "be[ing] disturbed no more" (II, 7:10). Then, a repetition: "I will give you rest from all your enemies," the *you* presumably referring to both Israel and her king. David's purpose, then, is the same as God's: Israel's well-being.

The gracious words from God (through Nathan) to David are met in kind by David's words to God, an elevated conversation between God and David that epitomizes in dialogue the dance David performs *before the Lord* (II, 7:4–8:29). The cloud of Michal's response to the ark and her subsequent barrenness of womb is juxtaposed with what follows in the narrative, an assurance of David's house flourishing and Israel's communal life thriving. David has brought the ark back home, and it is good.

The bitterness of Michal and the subsequent closure of her womb echo, in precise reversal, the original barrenness and bitterness of Hannah—whose barrenness and bitterness is transfigured into a mother's joy over the newborn life of Samuel. Let us ask once again: why has this episode of the ark—the brightest of David's hours, followed by the most extended affirmation of David from God that we have seen—why has the scene ended under such an obtrusive cloud as Michal's bitterness, and subsequent barrenness? It is a cloud that seems, in the end, to dominate the scene.

Narrative Attention to Ark Response, and Michal

As is so often the case when biblical narrative offers enigma and no explanation, we must remember what we have already heard. That's how patterns of repetition work. In the two preceding narrative sequences involving the ark

and altar, oppressed women have also taken center stage. Both of these prior episodes provide an important context for understanding the narrative role of Michal. The other two women have suffered in contexts of extreme communal woe: the ark is completely ineffectual in the Judges episode, and taken away from Israel by enemies in the beginning of I Samuel. In this third instance, communal weal has never been greater, celebration never more exuberant. But communal *shalom,* centered on ark and altar, is refused by a woman. Michal demonstrates a serious problem in her response to the sacrificial festivities surrounding the return of God's presence, represented by the ark, to Israel. Any sympathy for Michal is misplaced, given the narrative markers of the ark pattern as a whole.[28]

Michal's negative response to the advent of the ark's return must be measured in narrative terms by reference, also, to other responses to the ark.

There is the disastrous failure of Jeconiah's descendents: they "did not rejoice with the people of Beth-shemesh when they greeted the ark of the Lord"—with God striking seventy dead (I, 6:19).

Another disaster involving poor response to the ark follows in short narrative order. David has decided to bring the ark home to his city, Jerusalem. A certain Israelite, Uzzah, is struck dead by God for trying to stabilize the ark as it tips during transport. "The anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah" for touching the ark (II, 6:7). For his part, "David was angry because "*the Lord had burst forth* with an *outburst* upon Uzzah" (II, 6:8, NJB; emphasis mine). The ark occasions anger from God at Uzzah, answered by anger from David toward God.

Just before this ark sequence, we have heard David praising God: "The Lord has *burst forth* against my enemies [the Philistines] before me like *a bursting flood'* " (II, 5:20, NJB; emphasis mine). David knows about this bursting-forth of God. From David's perspective, such outbursts by God can be good, or bad. What did Uzzah do that deserved God's outburst, and death? The narrative ahead offers critical clues.

David is no fool: he is afraid of God because of this bursting-forth against Uzzah. "How can the ark of the Lord come into my care?" he asks (II, 6:9). Assuming a seemingly mysterious and arbitrary God who strikes someone dead who is only trying to take care of the ark, David asks a question that seems reasonable. David decides not to bring the ark back to his city, after all.

But then David hears that the temporary keepers of the ark are being blessed (II, 6:12). He immediately makes arrangements to have the ark brought home, completing its journey. All goes well, this time. What has made the difference?

Whether David checked more carefully into the manner of carrying the ark, or whether he figured out what the ark's rings were for, the fact is that rather than being perched on an ox-driven cart, now there were "those who bore the ark" (II, 6:13). What had Uzzah and Ahio done that proved so deadly wrong? They had ignored, or been ignorant of—in any case, were deficient in any intelligent or reverential regard for—the purpose of the rings on either side of the ark. In Exodus we find a divine and repeated safety precaution regarding such a sacred object: the ark was to be carried by means of twin poles running through the rings.[29] Uzzah and Ahio had commandeered an ark placed on a cart that was vulnerable to being shaken or overturned on rough terrain. The ark was not a coffer containing human baggage and goods: it housed the central truth of Israel, the covenant between them and God, crowned on top by the mercy-seat of God. With no explicit commentary, the narrator suggests with the smallest detail the greatest of issues: God's presence, through its representation in the ark, is central to Israel's life as a nation,[30] and calls forth from the community the utmost in human care. In the end, the response of God to the grossly inadequate handling of the ark makes narrative sense, given the overall narrative emphasis on the centrality of the ark to Israel's well-being, and with how the Israelites respond to the ark. The story's God, here, cannot be interpreted as peevish about Israel's not keeping the rules, or as mysteriously reactive concerning poor responses to the ark.[31]

From the episode in Judges in which we hear of a woman suffering death in a context of communal chaos, the ark proving ineffectual, to a priest's wife suffering death with news of the ark's loss, and the birth of a child named "departed glory of God," we come to this twist of pattern that points a narrative finger at a woman who, in the near-presence of the ark, fails to give due honor to God and community because of personally felt ill. Though some would contest the implication that the glory of God, represented by the ark, has returned to Israel, the text highlights by way of Michal's poor response the appropriateness of all Israel celebrating the sacrifice of communal well-being because the departure of God's glory has been overturned: God is in their midst.[32]

As suggested, Michal's derisive dismissal of David, and of the ark he tends, has a history. If viewed exclusively from the wife's point of view, Michal would seem to have a point. But precisely here seems to be the narrative issue: the need to let the merely personal be subsumed by the communal. For all the fraught background and present political realities of Michal's experience, we are left with a condemnation of her failure to join the community of God's people in its celebration of the ark's presence, the community's well-being, and God's covenantal faithfulness.

For now, David has brought the ark home, and Israel enjoys great communal well-being. For now. As we see next, David himself will be responsible for a communal chaos that includes a question focused on the ark's location.

4. Communal Chaos: Ark Stays, David Goes, Women in Trouble (II, 15:7–16:14)

From "there was no king" and communal horror we have moved to king and, finally, communal blessing.

But now we find a return to communal chaos, under King David. Here is David at his worst, yet he ends up being honored by God. The reason is highlighted, in part, by David's response to the ark. Echoing in reverse the taking of the ark into battle by Eli's wrongdoing sons, David refuses to bring the ark along in his flight from traitorous Absalom, though not without the advantage of having its handlers act as spies.[33]

From the time David brings the ark back into the worshiping life of Israel, the fortunes of David and the people of God have been on the rise. "David won a name for himself. . . . And the Lord gave victory to David wherever he went. So David reigned over all Israel; and David administered justice and equity to all the people"—though the immediately preceding narrative reveals a quite ruthless David in regard to surrounding peoples (II, 8:14–15; 2–14).[34] There can be little doubt here of the narrator's insistence on Israel's well-being and on David's goodness.[35] But then, "late one afternoon"—during "the time when kings go out to battle"—David wakes from his nap and spies a neighbor's beautiful wife, bathing (II, 11:1–2).

The juxtaposition between rise and fall could not be greater. From this point in the narrative, for a little more than eight chapters (II, 11:1–19:7), we find one instance after another of a king giving in to personal appetites and parochial loyalties, at the expense of the community. In rapid succession we find adultery, cover-up, murder, and, worst of all, a love that is narrowly familial, excessive, doting, and blind.[36] David caters to his sons rather than disciplining them—at the community's expense.

Will God override David's recreant ways and simply push on with the divine agenda to maintain David's house forever, as promised? We recall that Eli had a similar promise of "forever," about which God changed the divine mind. The last of David's wrongdoing concerning sons parallels Eli's honoring God less than *his* sons, and the subsequent death of these sons. Will the parallel

between father Eli and father David complete itself in God's abnegating the promise to David?

The king could hardly have been presented in more negative terms, from the Bathsheba-Uriah debacle through his disciplinary failure with son Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah—though a most wonderful twist occurs in the case of Adonijah (chapters 6, 9). The latter failure of David the father culminates in the king's flight from the son Absalom, a would-be king.

At the beginning of David's departure from Jerusalem we find a brief but telling ark appearance.

> The whole country wept aloud as all the people [fleeing with David] passed by; the king crossed the Wadi Kidron, and all the people moved on toward the wilderness. Abiathar came up, and Zadok also, with all the Levites, carrying the ark of the covenant of God. They set down the ark of God, until the people had all passed out of the city.
>
> Then the king said to Zadok, "Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see both it and the place where it stays. But if he says, 'I take no pleasure in you,' here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him." (II, 15:23–26)

Here David is all devotion, all trust in God. He will accept God's verdict on his behavior, his future.

But David is not just one who relies on God. He schemes, properly so. He does what he can, even while God, as it turns out, assists.

> The king also said to the priest Zadok [ark-bearer], "Look, go back to the city in peace, you and Abiathar, with your two sons, Ahimaaz your son, and Jonathan son of Abiathar. See, I will wait at the fords of the wilderness until word comes from you to inform me." So Zadok and Abiathar carried the ark of God back to Jerusalem, and they remained there. (II, 15:27–29)

As always, David is the politico and shrewd military commander who trusts in the God he seeks to honor. Robert Pinsky picks up, here, on David's uncanny capacity, as I have been noting, to bring together in one motion the godly and the political: "David tells [the priests] to return with the ark to Jerusalem—for reasons that, characteristically, are partly noble and partly shrewd: David managing things so that his pious resignation to the Lord's judgment will also give him a valuable network of spies in Jerusalem."[37]

Under cover of taking the ark back to Jerusalem, surely a proper religious move with proper religious motive, David sees opportunity. Under what better

guise to spy on the city taken over by Absalom than to use the bearers of the ark? On the other hand, just as important, are David's words, "*If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see both it and the place where it stays. But if he says, 'I take no pleasure in you,' here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him.*" The ark is God's ark. As some have seen, the ark is not the king's possession, not protection against threat to his person.[38]And David is always the leader. Even here, in his weeping and barefoot flight, what David does, his loyal followers will do. "But David went up the ascent of the Mount of Olives, *weeping as he went,* with his head covered and walking barefoot; and all the people who were with him covered their heads and went up, *weeping as they went*" (II, 15:30; emphasis mine). Unlike the followers of Saul, who desert their king (as we have seen), those following David are as devoted to him as David is devoted to God and to them.

A bit later, David repeats the same deep conviction of his possible wrong and of his keen sense that it is God's decision as to whether or not his fortunes as king will be restored. Abigail's warning about taking vengeance is heeded under most provoking circumstances.

> When King David came to Bahurim, a man of the family of the house of Saul came out whose name was Shimei son of Gera; he came out cursing. He threw stones at David and at all the servants of King David; now all the people and all the warriors were on his right and on his left.
>
> Shimei shouted while he cursed, "Out! Out! Murderer! Scoundrel! The Lord has avenged on all of you the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the Lord has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, disaster has overtaken you; for you are a man of blood." (II, 16:5–8)

Harsher words are hard to imagine. They are followed up by a challenge to David by the always ready and high-spirited champion warrior Abishai. Like his brother Joab, Abishai minces no words: "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and take off his head" (II, 16:9).

David's response is remarkable for its perspective and depth of feeling, his capacity to detach:

> But the king said, "What have I to do with you, you sons[39] of Zeruiah? If he is cursing because the Lord has said to him, 'Curse David,' who then shall say, 'Why have you done so?' "
>
> David said to Abishai and to all his servants, "My own son seeks my life; how much more now may this Benjaminite! Let him alone,

> and let him curse; for the Lord has bidden him. It may be that the Lord will look on my distress, and the Lord will repay me with good for this cursing of me today." (II, 16:10–12)

In the equation of insult and vengeance, King David recognizes the factor of God, as Abigail had earlier suggested to a murderous David (I, 25:26–31).

David's spirit here—perhaps the Lord is cursing me through Shimei, perhaps the Lord will repay me—is of a piece with the quality of his response in refusing to take the ark along: *Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back*. "So David and his men went on the road, while Shimei went along on the hillside opposite him and cursed as he went, throwing stones and flinging dust at him" (II, 16:5–13).

The text reveals David's thinking—or at least his words to that effect—that he may be guilty, even though the immediate circumstances do not directly impugn him; Saul, clearly guilty, twice insisted on his innocence (chapter 1). David acknowledges even the possibility of guilt. This king refuses to take the ark along as a God-guarantee of his safety, whereas Eli's sons, with complete disregard for God, accompany God's ark into battle as a charm against an untoward outcome. Without attention to the story's patterns, it is possible to miss such contrasts as exist between David and Saul, or between David and Eli's sons relative to the ark.[40]

Note again the parallel of deep sentiment between the two key statements of David regarding, respectively, the ark scene and the cursing scene[41]:

- ARK: *"If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see both it and the place where it stays. But if he says, 'I take no pleasure in you,' here I am, let him do to me what seems good to him."*
- *SHIMEI: "If he is cursing because the Lord has said to him, 'Curse David,' who then shall say, 'Why have you done so?' . . . let him curse; for the Lord has bidden him. It may be that the Lord will look on my distress, and the Lord will repay me with good for this cursing of me today."*

David indeed will find "favor in the eyes of the Lord," seeing both "it" (the ark) and "the place [tabernacle] where it stays." The Lord will repay him, in fact, "with good for this cursing" from Shimei.

As in the prior three ark sequences, women-in-trouble are a feature, though not prominent. Here, the ten concubines of David are ravaged, in public, during the time of the king's physical separation from the ark, from Jerusalem.

- So the king left, followed by all his household, except ten concubines whom he left behind to look after the house. (II, 15:16)

- Ahithophel said to Absalom, "Go in to your father's concubines, the ones he has left to look after the house; and all Israel will hear that you have made yourself odious to your father, and the hands of all who are with you will be strengthened." So they pitched a tent for Absalom upon the roof; and Absalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel. (II, 16:21–22)

Reuniting ark and king bodes well for Israel. David returns, as he has hoped, to the ark and to the place where it dwells (II, 15:25). The fortunes of Israel are once again restored, though not easily (II, 20:22–26).[42] As we see next, in the final ark episode, the height of Israel's communal well-being comes at a time when the ark is "in place," honored as never before: it now dwells in its own permanent home, the newly-built Temple.

5. Ending Frame: Communal Fulfillment: Ark and Temple (I Kings 7:51–8:1)

David has died, and his son Solomon, especially loved by God, reigns. Never has there been such a high level of communal well-being for all the people of Israel, a supreme happiness and justice (though of relatively short duration). In this epilogue-like moment in David's story, we find all of Israel listening to Solomon, who is speaking of God's promise to David "this day fulfilled."

> Now the Lord has upheld the promise that he made; for I have risen in the place of my father David; I sit on the throne of Israel, as the Lord promised, and have built the house for the name of the Lord, the God of Israel. There I have provided a place for the ark, in which is the covenant of the Lord that he made with our ancestors when he brought them out of the land of Egypt. (I Kings 8:20–21)

That is, the primary purpose of the Temple is to house the ark, the significance of which is spelled out as lying in its contents, "the covenant of the Lord that he made with our ancestors"—*and by extension, us.*

> Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven.
>
> He said, "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart, the covenant that you kept for your servant my father David as you declared to him; you promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand." (I Kings 8:22–24)

This is the day of fulfillment, to which the preceding narrative—most especially the David story in Samuel—bears witness.

The days leading up to this glorious time have been the best of times for Israel. Having heard one of King Solomon's judgments, "[the assembly of Israel] stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to execute justice" (I Kings 3:28). Israel, by now, has multiplied and filled the earth, and the people are truly blessed: "Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand by the sea; they ate and drank and were happy" (I Kings 4:20).

However short-lived, justice and peace reign in Israel. From the horrendous days at the end of the judges, when rape and butchery predominated in Israel—"there was no king in Israel"—we have come a long narrative journey to this son of David. In his prayer (above), King Solomon recognizes the fulfillment of the "covenant that you [God] kept for your servant my father David." All is well, for now, with the Davidic kingship, and with Israel.[43]

There was a time in Israel, this story says, when God's support of a king, however reluctant at first, came to glorious fruition. What God had wanted all along, this pattern attests, comes true: God's presence is recognized as central in the life of the community, represented by the honor accorded the ark and facilitated by a king who honors God, finally, more than his sons. Justice and peace reign in Israel. Here is an Israel, in fact, willing, if but for a moment, to hear its ultimate purpose as God's people: the blessing of *shalom,* justice and peace, even to all the other peoples of the world. Here we have exhibit A: "Judah and Israel were as numerous as the sand by the sea; they ate and drank and were happy"—but it doesn't stop there. Exhibit B: The king goes on in his prayer, "when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you" (I Kings 8:41–43). The ark of the covenant is at the heart of an agreement that includes, on God's part, the only unchanging thing (in this story) about the divine: a steadfast loyalty toward Israel's well-being and through Israel, the world's, a covenant begun with father Abraham.[44]

Conclusion

Early in the book of Joshua, back when Israel was crossing Jordan into the promised land and shortly thereafter razing the walls of Jericho, the ark of the

covenant figured prominently. Thereafter it disappears, for the remainder of Joshua and all of Judges—until that last, desperate scene in Judges, when there was no king in Israel. Everyone was doing what was right in their own eyes: raping, pillaging, and killing each other. The reappearance of the ark in the middle of this chaos, which continues, serves to indicate its irrelevance—or worse—when summoned as a solution to social mayhem. A few short chapters later, it reappears in early Samuel accompanied by community-wrecking, God-flaunting priests—and again proves ineffectual, and worse. It is taken away from Israel by the conquering enemy.

With Israel at its communal best, gathered before King Solomon and the ark, in its new permanent home, we find a conclusion to the narrative pattern of ark appearances begun at the end of Judges. With the house of King David secured (for now), we find a resolution to the earlier dilemma of how the ark is to function—what it means in Israel's everyday life. Nowhere more than in its return home, to the new city of David, do we find its function and meaning: with a king who unites the people and rules with justice and equity, with God's assistance and approval, the ark moves to the center of worship and the sacrifice of communal well-being. Here is the presence of God with God's people, in covenantal fulfillment.

Viewed from the perspective of the ark pattern, the narrative role and character of David becomes less and less mysterious. That the ark—the presence of God—is central to Israel's well-being yet is not a magical cause of that well-being, as witness the Judges and early Samuel instances. David brings the ark back to the heart of worshiping Israel, and respectfully leaves it behind when his wrongdoing as a father forces flight. What we discover about the character of David is demonstrated by the two ark episodes in which he is involved. His almost contrary capacities, anticipated by the multiple introductions with which we began, are on display.

The mystery about David was such, initially, that no one, not even the seer, could see him clearly. We have seen David, when the ark comes home, dancing—as the reliable narrator tells us—before the Lord, and before all the happy people. But we still can't see everything, like the possible political motivation that accrues to the consolidation of religious worship here at the heart of political power.

And there is a second David, waiting, responsive, receptive—calming the king's nerves on request, with music. Fleeing Absalom, David proves willing to wait, receptively, leaving the ark behind. *Carry the ark of God back into the city. If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, he will bring me back and let me see both*

it and the place where it stays (II, 15:25). And with Shimei, a paralleled trusting of God's determination, rather than taking immediate retaliatory action as urged by his commander, Abishai: *Let him alone,* says David, *and let him curse; for the Lord has bidden him. It may be that the Lord will look on my distress* (II, 16:11–12).

Another David is scheming while apparently God-devoted, as in the slaying of Goliath. Weeping as he flees Absalom, David professes trust in God while taking shrewd initiative. He has the ark-bearers return the ark, and on their own return to act as spies. When told that the very wise Ahithophel is a co-conspirator with Absalom, the king immediately turns to God: "O Lord, I pray you, turn the counsel of Ahithophel into foolishness" (II, 15:31). On the other hand, David himself schemes, arranging for an undercover agent to countermand the counsels of Ahithophel. Agent Hushai will have to prevaricate, says David, concerning Hushai's true allegiance. Aided by the spy scheme associated with bearing the ark back to Jerusalem, the present conniving works perfectly (II, 15:27–28, 32–37; 16:15–17:23). Here is a savvy king able to take intelligent and courageous initiative while fully receptive to outcomes determined by God.

God's determination?[45] What of David's calculated determining? It turns out that the purpose of David's scheming for his own return to Jerusalem, the ark, and his rule, is in line with a God who "had ordained to defeat the good counsel of Ahithophel, so that the Lord might bring ruin on Absalom" (II, 17:14). And in so doing, God paves the way home for David (II, 20:3). Even here, however, the intertwining of divine and human wills, in themselves complex, is a very complicated tension: both the houses of Israel and of Judah vie for honors in bringing David home, with a resulting war of words and then actual separation of Israel from David (II, 19:10–11; 15). The way home, to the ark and Jerusalem, is anything but a smooth journey simply ordained by God. Israel temporarily follows a renegade, Sheba (II, 19:41–20:2). Sheba and the men of Israel are pursued by Joab, who is persuaded by a wise woman to accept Sheba's head rather than engage in civil war and bloodshed (II, 20:6–22). But finally, the community is restored to health, if not to robust health. God acting, David acting; David responding, God responding. David and the ark prove illustrative of David's character and the complex drama of which he is a part.

Each ark appearance fits both its own immediate narrative context and is informed by the larger ark pattern. Within this pattern, a repetition easily ignored as such,[46] David's response to the ark is crucial in revealing character and explaining action.

Pattern Seven: The Ark of the Covenant

	ARK, JUDGES Judges 19: 1–21; 25	ARK APPEARANCE #1 I Samuel 2:12–7:2	ARK APPEARANCE #2 II Samuel 6:2–23	ARK APPEARANCE #3 II Samuel 15:13–16:22	ARK, I KINGS I Kings 7:51–8:66
ARK, STATUS	Ark ineffectual: twice, "there was no king. . . ."	Ark is captured by the enemy.	Ark is restored to Israel, at its height under David.	Ark left behind, in Jerusalem, by fleeing David	Ark in "the most holy place" of the "house" of the Lord
COMMUNAL CHAOS, WELL-BEING	disarray: orgiastic sex, rape, murder, civil war	disarray: priestly greed, sexual misconduct; threat of war	Feast of communal well-being led by king-priest David	disarray: civil war; King David flees; Jerusalem	Israel at its happiest under son of David
WOMEN	Concubine's master offers her; she is gang-raped and dies.	A wife, giving birth, dies in childbirth: names child "Glory-of-Israel-Departed"	Michal becomes barren (absenting herself ark celebration	Absalom sleeps with father's concubines, publicly.	Happy are wives of Solomon.
KEEPERS OF THE ARK	Phineas, good; but communal chaos renders the Ark ineffectual	Phineas and Hophni, evil (ark taken into battle)	Ark brought back by King David, who is at his best: community thrives	King David leaves ark in Jerusalem	Many good priests

Where there had been poor response to the ark under Eli and his spoiled sons, David demonstrates appropriate respect—and beyond, a communal celebration, dancing, trumpets, and banquet. But we see in the next two chapters the worst of David, his terribly wrong love of sons. Even at his worst, however, the best of David emerges: David is willing, at some eleventh hours, to turn around from his blindness and to see again, to take corrective action regarding his obsessive love of sons.

6

Failed Fathers: Personal Indulgence, Public Woe

Pattern 8

Having arrived at the height of Israel's monarchal and communal glory, King David soon gives way to indulgences both physical and familial. He yields to the lure of another man's wife, and covers up his adultery by having the husband killed. Worse, at least in terms of its effect on communal well-being, is the wrongdoing of an indulgent father: son Amnon rapes a sister without reprimand from his father; son Absalom kills his brother Amnon and stirs rebellion in the kingdom with no word or action from his father; finally, son Adonijah, to whom David has never spoken a word of displeasure, surreptitiously seeks the throne without his enfeebled father's endorsement. Just as Eli did before him, David falters grievously as a father, with momentous negative consequences for the people he is supposed to be ruling. In the end, as David lies dying, we find a twist in the pattern that yields a culminating insight into David's character and an added confirmation of what God found in David that pleased the divine heart.

1. *Eli's Paternal Indulgence: Two Sons Die (I, 2:12–4:22)*
2. *David's Paternal Indulgence: Amnon, Son, Dies (II, 13:1–29)*
3. *David's Paternal Indulgence: Absalom, Son, Dies (II, 13:30–19:15)*
4. *David's Paternal Indulgence: Adonijah, Reversal, and Solomon (I Kings 1:5–2:25)*

1. Eli's Paternal Indulgence: Two Sons Die (I, 2:12–4:22)

As we have just seen, the unthinkable has happened to Israel: the ark of the covenant, signifying God's presence, is lost to Israel's enemies the Philistines. Eli, judge and priest, was keeper of the ark (I, 3:3). Eli's great flaw, which led to the loss of both the ark and his two priest-sons, was to honor these sons more than God (I, 2:29). The story of Eli initiates a pattern of fathers in leadership positions who fail to discipline their sons; he ignores God and the divine mandate for a rule beyond parochial interests. Within this pattern, communal suffering attends indulgent leaders.

In the very first verses of I Samuel, Eli's sons are cited in such a tangentially related context as to call attention to their significant role in the narrative ahead.[1] This apparently gratuitous and ominous citing of Hophni and Phinehas—nothing about them is described, and nothing in the initial narrative context gives warrant for their mention—gives way to a fast-paced narrative in which a barren woman, bitter, cries out to God, takes a vow, and births a son, Samuel. Honoring her vow, Hannah gives the child Samuel to the Lord for the duration of Samuel's life (I, 1:9–28). Eli, father of the aforementioned sons, will be Samuel's keeper.

The mother relinquishes a son to God's service, proving a foil for what we will see of Eli. Hannah's honoring of God is expressed in her poem, one that will be echoed at the story's end by a poem of David.

Hannah's son will prove to be a bearer of God's word, a mostly good person who will function as judge, priest, and prophet. Contrariwise:

> The sons of Eli were scoundrels; they had no regard for the Lord or for the duties of the priests to the people. When anyone offered sacrifice, the priest's servant would come, while the meat was boiling, with a three-pronged fork in his hand, he would thrust it into the pan, or kettle, or caldron, or pot; all that the fork brought up the priest would take for himself. This is what they did at Shiloh to all the Israelites who came there.
>
> Moreover, before the fat was burned, the priest's servant would come and say to the one who was sacrificing, "Give meat for the priest to roast; for he will not accept boiled meat from you, but only raw."
>
> And if the man said to him, "Let them burn the fat first, and then take whatever you wish," he would say, "No, you must give it now;

> if not, I will take it by force." Thus the sin of the young men was very great in the sight of the Lord; for they treated the offerings of the Lord with contempt. (I, 2:12–17)

How can a good parent have such awful sons?

Just how severely things might deteriorate is clear to the attentive audience: *the sons of Eli were scoundrels* echoes those wicked and godless rapists—*scoundrels*—in the immediately preceding story, at the end of Judges.[2] Soon the audience will hear another repetition of "scoundrel," in the words of a sister raped by a brother—a coddled son of David.

The scandalized sacrifice of well-being, with the two sons acting so poorly, is Israel's great festival feast, a banquet in which all interested parties receive portions of food, from God on down to priests and people.[3] In effect, the sons of Eli have been robbing God and the people they serve in order to satisfy their own appetites.

Immediately we come to a brief narrative interlude that picks up on the story of Hannah with which we began (I, 2:18–21). By way of juxtaposition, the narrative moves several times between the faulty parent and the good parent, the bad sons and the good son.

The offspring of Hannah, we are told, is a "gift that she made to the Lord" (I, 2:20). God returns the favor to Hannah, blessing her with three more sons and two daughters.

Quickly we are returned to the two wayward sons of Eli. Initially, it appears that an aged father does what an aged father can.

> Now Eli was very old. He heard all that his sons were doing to all Israel, and how they lay with the women who served at the entrance to the tent of meeting.
>
> He said to them, "Why do you do such things? For I hear of your evil dealings from all these people. No, my sons; it is not a good report that I hear the people of the Lord spreading abroad. If one person sins against another, someone can intercede for the sinner with the Lord; but if someone sins against the Lord, who can make intercession?"
>
> But they would not listen to the voice of their father; for it was the will of the Lord to kill them. (I, 2:22–25)

What's this? The sons are bad because of the Lord's will to kill them?

Too late the father hears of his sons' evil dealings. His words fall on ears of sons who can no longer hear—and so "it was the will of the Lord to kill

them." Eli speaks words, but does nothing else. And there's more amiss, ahead.

Once again we leave the main narrative, briefly: "Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people" (I, 2:26).

Then, back to the priestly sons, and father—and to God's interests in their affairs:

> A man of God came to Eli and said to him, "Thus the Lord has said, 'I revealed myself to the family of your ancestor in Egypt when they were slaves to the house of Pharaoh. I chose him out of all the tribes of Israel to be my priest, to go up to my altar, to offer incense, to wear an ephod before me; and I gave to the family of your ancestor all my offerings by fire from the people of Israel. Why then look with greedy eye at my sacrifices and my offerings that I commanded, and honor your sons more than me by fattening yourselves on the choicest parts of every offering of my people Israel?'
>
> "Therefore the Lord the God of Israel declares: 'I promised that your family and the family of your ancestor should go in and out before me forever'; but now the Lord declares: 'Far be it from me; for those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be treated with contempt. . . . The fate of your two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, shall be the sign to you—both of them shall die on the same day. (I, 2:27–34)

Beyond the excessive "honoring of sons" is Eli's "greedy eye at [God's] sacrifice," a collusion with sons in "fattening" himself at God's and the peoples' expense. We learn shortly that Eli is, in fact, not just very old but very fat. Whatever status in his day accrued to being corpulent, the narrative hint is that Eli's being fat is a likely factor contributing to his death (I, 2:27–36; 4:18).

The food is ill gained by father and sons, and so the Lord asks, through the prophet, *Why [do you] honor your sons more than me . . . ?* So drastic is this issue as to make God go back on the divine word, taking away from Eli the glory of a dynastic line: "I promised that your family and the family of your ancestor should go in and out before me forever, but now the Lord declares: 'Far be it from me; for those who honor me I will honor, and those who despise me shall be treated with contempt' " (I, 2:29–30).

A "faithful priest," we hear, will replace Eli and his dynasty: this is Zadok, who figures prominently in the last instance of this father-son pattern, a priest who will assist David to rise above himself in dealing with sons (I, 2:35).[4]

The Samuel and Eli strands of story are most noticeably interwoven in a sequence germane to the father-sons story. Samuel the boy hears a voice and finally identifies it, with Eli's help, as God's voice. And here is the word of God that comes to Samuel, a message for Eli, says God, "that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle." BOTH ears. The narrator continues God's words to young Samuel:

> On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. (I, 3:12–13)

On one hand, a faithful parent relinquishes her son to God's service, which is service to the community and public good. Parent and offspring are blessed, as are the people of God. On the other hand, a father, leader of the people, has not restrained his sons, honoring them more than God: dire personal and familial consequences follow. Most significant, however, Israel suffers.

Through his disastrous fathering, King David the father will similarly bring chaos to the people of Israel and ruination to his family.

As we saw in chapter 5, Eli's two sons die an untimely death, accompanied by the ark's being captured by the enemy. Old and fat, Eli topples over backward, dead, when he hears the news of the ark's capture and his sons' death. Honoring of sons more than God has left Eli and Israel bereft of God's presence, symbolized by the now captured ark. And Eli's sons are killed, lost to the father forever.

2. David's Paternal Indulgence: Amnon, Son, Dies (II, 13:1–29)

Shortly after his greatness has been established, the shadow side of David becomes the narrative focus, starting at II Samuel 11. The mystery man becomes much less puzzling as he moves in the direction of an obsessive love and the resulting failure of appropriate discipline.

As we saw in chapter 5, David's capacities to reign with political shrewdness, military courage, and God-devoted piety are on fullest narrative display with David's return of the ark and an extended exchange with God (II, 6 and 7).

Good things have followed. He has extended his victory over the Philistines, and the kingdom's boundaries are now greater than they have ever been: "David reigned over all Israel; and David administered justice and equity to all his people" (II, 8:15). The king shows kindness to a member of Saul's family, Jonathan's lame son Mephibosheth (II, 9). Foreign allies, the Ammonites, are also shown consideration by David, but they rebuff his advances of friendship. Battle ensues; Joab is sent out to engage the enemy while David resists another foreign enemy closer to home. The forces of David win (II, 10).

But then, at that time of year "when kings go out to battle," David stays home and yields to lust, adultery, cover-up, and murder (II, 11). The infant son of his adulterous relationship is struck dead.

The sexual wrong of the father is reenacted in horrific manner by a son, Amnon. "David's son Absalom had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar; and David's son Amnon fell in love with her. Amnon was so tormented that he made himself ill because of his sister Tamar, for she was a virgin and it seemed impossible to Amnon to do anything to her" (II, 13:1).

Despite customary visits, the father appears careless, without attention, concerning Amnon's state of mind. Jonadab, on the other hand, visits and notices. He is a friend of the family, a cousin to Amnon, and he sees the obvious: "O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning?" (II, 13:3–4) Amnon confesses immediately his desire for Tamar. Knowing the king's habit of visiting his son, Jonadab gives advice: pretend to be ill, "and when your father comes to see you, say to him, 'Let my sister give me something to eat, and prepare the food in my sight, so that I may see it and eat from her hand" (II, 13:4–5). And so it happens.

> So Tamar went to her brother Amnon's house, where he was lying down. She took dough, kneaded it, made cakes in his sight, and baked the cakes. Then she took the pan and set them out before him, but he refused to eat.
>
> Amnon said, "Send out everyone from me." So everyone went out from him.
>
> Then Amnon said to Tamar, "Bring the food into the chamber, so that I may eat from your hand."
>
> So Tamar took the cakes she had made, and brought them into the chamber to Amnon her brother.
>
> But when she brought them near him to eat, he took hold of her, and said to her, "Come, lie with me, my sister."
>
> She answered him, "No, my brother, do not force me; for such a thing is not done in Israel; do not do anything so vile! As for me,

> where could I carry my shame? And as for you, you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel. Now therefore, I beg you, speak to the king; for he will not withhold me from you." (II, 13:8–13)

In spite of Tamar's accurate and impassioned condemnations—"you would be as one of the scoundrels in Israel"—Amnon rapes his half-sister, and then, against her frantic protests, abandons her.

Brother Absalom tries to console his sister. We are told that he hates Amnon because of all that has happened (II, 13:1–22). We have been subtly prepared for Absalom's hatred by information juxtaposed in the sentence that begins the sad sequence: "David's son Absalom had a beautiful sister whose name was Tamar; and David's son Amnon fell in love with her" (II, 13:1). Why does the narrator bring Absalom into the picture at this early point? We are left with a hint of something to follow: Absalom on the one hand, Amnon on the other.

"When King David heard of all these things [Amnon's incestuous rape and subsequent scorn of Tamar], he became very angry, but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him" (II, 13:20–21).[5] Father David does nothing; Absalom hates Amnon. We are being prepared for something ominous, even from that first sentence where Absalom shows up gratuitously, it seems. The narrator offers very little moral evaluation or comment. But here is a rare exception, an implication of wrong: David does not punish his son *because he loved him.*

David loves Amnon. Half-brother Amnon "fell in love" with his sister.[6] And God loves Solomon. Such qualitative distinguishing among loves is important in David's story, especially within this failed-fathers pattern.

The king has already heard that God's love involves decisive discipline. Through Nathan, God had communicated to David the parental ways of the Almighty, relative to sons: "I shall be a father to him [Solomon], and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings" (II, 7:14). God's punishment for the king's adultery and murder will be most severe: not only will the infant son die, but David's family will be subject to the sword's violence (II, 12:10). For his part, David ignores the divine paradigm for parent-child relationships. David's physical indulgence with Bathsheba has become an indulgence of the heart, first with Amnon.

Hating Amnon, "Absalom spoke neither good nor bad" to him (II, 13:22). David, as we have just seen, has done nothing. What is especially ominous here is the silence of hatred from Absalom and the silence of love from David—a two-year period of inaction.

> But Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad; for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had raped his sister Tamar. After two full years Absalom had sheepshearers at Baal-hazor, which is near Ephraim, and Absalom invited all the king's sons.
>
> Absalom came to the king, and said, "Your servant has sheep-shearers; will the king and his servants please go with your servant?"
>
> But the king said to Absalom, "No, my son, let us not all go, or else we will be burdensome to you."

Absalom apparently knows his father well, and will not take *no* for answer. The son will get what he wants.

> [Absalom] pressed him, but he would not go but gave him his blessing. Then Absalom said, "If not, please let my brother Amnon go with us."
>
> The king said to him, "Why should he go with you?" (II, 13:22–26)

David asks the right question, receives no answer, and lets the matter go without further remonstrance. "Absalom pressed him," and David capitulates (II, 13:27).

In spite of the implicit suspicion expressed in David's question to Absalom about Amnon's attendance at the party, Absalom is allowed to have Amnon at the feast. Perhaps David senses that an action that he himself is incapable of taking against Amnon will be taken for him, by Absalom, or perhaps David merely gives way to Absalom, heedlessly. Because he loves Absalom?

Not unexpectedly, to the text's audience, Absalom arranges for the swift dispatch of the brother who violated his sister Tamar (II, 13:28–29). David mourns.

The horror of Amnon's actions, not dealt with by the father, were perceived acutely by the daughter. She called brother Amnon's offense "vile" (*nebalah*)—another echoing, like "scoundrel," of the horrific last story in Judges.[7] Eli and David are fathers of scoundrels, sons who commit community-wrecking sacrilege.

Have the fathers themselves committed their own subtle sacrilege, a setting up of sons—an honoring of sons—in the place of God? David is rightly angry at Amnon's action—but wrongly does nothing about it, *because he loved him*. And how does this love figure on the scale of loving God, of honoring God?

The pattern of failed fathers is suggesting that there can be nothing worse than a confusion of loves that leads to the parochial and self-serving familial love that inevitably leads to communal chaos if the offender is a leader of the people.

3. David's Paternal Indulgence: Absalom, Son, Dies (II, 13:30–19:15)

Mention of the king's mourning at news of Amnon's death is framed by reference to Absalom's flight, to Geshur, as if the narrator wants us to know that Absalom's self-exile is possibly more significant, for David, than Amnon's death (more on this in chapter 7). Geshur, to the east of the Jordan River, is easily reachable for David, whose extended family resides there. The audience is aware, also, that the king has already conquered peoples even farther east, at Helam.[8] And yet David takes no action against the murderous son. For the three years of Absalom's exile, the father does nothing.

The inaction is underlined in the narrative by the very next verses, in which we hear of Joab's scheme to get David to act in regard to Absalom. "Now Joab son of Zeruiah perceived that the king's mind was *on* [or *against*] Absalom" (II, 14:1)[9]—and Joab will do something. The state of David's mind is accentuated not only by the ambiguity of just which son is being mourned, above, but also by the narrator's possible use of ambiguous syntax (is it "on" or is it "against"?). In either case, David's tough-minded commander plans to sucker David into a rapprochement with Absalom. And he does so by means of playing on the emotional weakness of David through a clever woman's story. A widow of Tekoa offers the king a tale of woe (fiction or not we are never sure) in which she pleads that her only remaining son, guilty of fratricide, be spared. *Will the king, please, be merciful rather than exacting punishment?* The woman informs David that her community demands the life of the murderer as justice requires, but that such justice would leave her without further offspring, and thus, an end to the family line. David's first response? "Go to your house, and I will give orders concerning you"—a possible stall, so typical of David's reaction to similar situations within his own household, or, perhaps, a genuine need to mull two conflicting goods, the justice of having a murderer put to death against the established value of preserving a man's family line, if at all possible (II, 14:8; see Exod. 21:12).

The woman further plays on David's emotions by suggesting that any guilt, presumably incurred by David for a decision favoring her son rather than the community, be placed on her head, and not the king's. That is, the woman recognizes the possibility that granting clemency is a breach of communal justice that outweighs the attending ill of not allowing a family line to continue. David unnecessarily and immediately capitulates to the woman, swearing that no one will hurt her, or her son (II, 14:9–11). A questionable compassion overrides the demands of justice.

Now that she has extracted this word from the king, the woman goes on to drive home the point of telling her tale to the king:

> "Why then has the king, who by giving this verdict has condemned himself, conceived the idea, against God's people's interests, of not bringing home the son whom he has banished? . . . Let the king therefore make plans for his banished son not to remain far away from him [David] in exile." (II, 14:13–14, NJB)

David grants the woman—and Joab behind the scenes—their request. The point of the widow's tale is not ambiguous.[10] Through the machinations of Joab, whose motivations remain obscure, Absalom is allowed back in town by the king—but not into the king's presence (II, 14:21, 24).

Apparently hearing what he wants to hear, David has failed to question the false analogies between the woman's tale and his own dilemma with Absalom. The woman had no descendants left. David does: David's line and Israel's well-being is in no peril of there being no descendants should Absalom remain an outcast. The woman's sons quarreled in the fields, one slaying the other in a heat of passion; Absalom's murder of Amnon was premeditated over a two-year period of the father's inaction, a slaying Absalom carefully orchestrated. It takes no moral genius to distinguish between a crime of passion and a premeditated murder in cold blood, yet David fails to press home to himself such a distinction, among others.[11]

Without any word or action regarding his son, David has allowed Absalom to come home, though the son's exile has been self-imposed. David has been swept away by his indiscriminately compassionate hearing of the widow's story—a downside to an otherwise fine receptivity that we saw in the David who soothes Saul with music. David's capacity to listen—to Abigail, for example, has become a liability, an assessment easily missed unless we note the context of a pattern of failed fathers.[12] David is capable of paying close attention, of receiving what is being told him—sometimes with discrimination, sometimes without. For the good, David is receptive to truth that transforms; for ill, he falls prey to fatherly parochialism and passion, entertaining the widow's false analogy that confirms a predisposed inclination on his part.

David's maverick commander Joab apparently has known all about the range of David's listening powers for better and for ill. Joab has perceived "that the king's mind was on [or against] Absalom," and so he sets the stage for what turns out to be David's further capitulation into a doting that is coupled with lack of disciplinary action. Failure to note such accumulating details of David's overweaning emotional attachment to sons leads to questionable assessments

of David's character, a serious difficulty, since the entire story is informed by a dynamic concerning questions and answers as to who David is.[13]

A final difference in circumstance between the woman's plight and David's prepares the audience for what will come of David's acquiescence to the widow's point: her hoped-for resumption of normal interaction between parent and murderous offspring will appear in juxtaposition with David's refusal to see Absalom on his son's return.

> So Joab set off, went to Geshur, and brought Absalom to Jerusalem. The king said, "Let him go to his own house; he is not to come into my presence." So Absalom went to his own house, and did not come into the king's presence. (II, 14:23–24)

Allowing Absalom back, the king continues his refusal to say or do anything to a son guilty of fratricide.

Time seems to fly by: in just a few verses, the narrator lets us know that Absalom is praised throughout Israel for his beauty, that he has wonderful hair, and that he sires two sons plus a daughter he names Tamar. And then a surprising but not unexpected disclosure: "Absalom lived two full years in Jerusalem, without coming into the king's presence" (II, 14:25–28). It apparently makes little difference, in the throes of such passivity, whether David's preoccupation with his son (II, 14:1) had been toward or against Absalom. The king simply refuses to take the necessary action to resolve anything between father and son. Absalom's action exposes the father's emotional doldrums:

> Then Absalom sent for Joab to send him to the king; but Joab would not come to him. He sent a second time, but Joab would not come.
>
> Then he said to his servants, "Look, Joab's field is next to mine, and he has barley there; go and set it on fire."
>
> So Absalom's servants set the field on fire.
>
> Joab rose and went to Absalom at his house, and said to him, "Why have your servants set my field on fire?"
>
> Absalom answered Joab, "Look, I sent word to you: Come here, that I may send you to the king with the question, 'Why have I come from Geshur? It would be better for me to be there still.' Now let me go into the king's presence; if there is guilt in me, let him kill me!" (II, 14:29–32)

Absalom convinces Joab to get him an audience with his father. David allows the suit. "So [Absalom] came to the king and prostrated himself with his face

to the ground before the king. And the king kissed Absalom." Wordlessly, with no action at all: just the kiss (II, 14:33). After a five-year hiatus between father and son, we find nothing from father to son except a silent kiss that hangs in a condemning limbo that is seemingly without end.

And so Absalom fills the continuing vacuum with his own personal ambition, with action. He gets himself "a chariot and horses" and occupies the king's place at the town's judgment seat. All suitors are in the right, according to the upstart's obsequious judgments: to each and every one he offers his hand and a kiss, "and so Absalom stole the hearts of the people of Israel" (II, 15:2–6). Does the son's pernicious kiss echo the father's, the one leading to the other?

Absalom mounts an attack, forcing his emotionally crippled father, the king, into exile (II, 14:28–15:37). The son arranges for a tent on his father's roof so that he can consort with his father's concubines "in the sight of all Israel" (II, 16:22). Like Saul before him, Absalom "set up for himself a pillar," doing so "in the King's valley" (II, 18:18). Derelict father, delinquent son.

Except for some strategic last-minute planning on David's part and a grand blunder on Absalom's part, the son's treason against his father could well have been successful. As I showed in chapter 5, David's seeking of God at this desperate point coincides with brilliant thinking on his own part, with deceit appropriate to conditions of war—a deceit implemented, in part, by God (II, 15:27–37; 16:15–17:23).

All works out in David's favor, and now Absalom is the one fleeing, from his father's forces. Against the expressed wishes of David, Joab slays Absalom, who hangs helplessly by his handsome hair from a tree branch (II, 18:5, 9–15). Obviously Joab had a choice: free Absalom from the tree and present him as a captive to his father or be rid of him, against David's wishes. The commander is a realist who knows well this father's runaway compassion. Joab does not risk giving Absalom back to his father.

The death of Absalom is the supreme blow of David's life, as measured by the bellowing of his community-threatening sobs. With stern words, Joab interrupts the king's sobbing, shaking the king from his fatherly grief. As I will show in the following chapter, David immediately does the right thing. He returns to the town gate, assuming his royal responsibilities—a reversal, as one reader notes, in which "the king takes the place of the father."[14] David as leader of the people transcends David the parochial father.

What this pattern of indulgent fathers reveals is the mischief David creates for himself and his family—and the kingdom—after the Bathsheba-Uriah wrongdoing and consequences decreed by God. The failure is an indulgence that cherishes an offspring's favorable response rather than that

offspring's own well-being. The King-father's failure stands in ironic contrast to God's parental insistence on disciplining, delivered to David through Nathan.[15]

Within the story's pattern of fathers and sons, David's ongoing failures with Amnon and Absalom are understood as the narrative stage for—become an interpretive tool for determining—a final failure turned to victory,[16] as we see next.

4. David's Paternal Indulgence: Adonijah, Reversal, and Solomon (I Kings 1:5–2:25)

Just before he dies—as he lies dying—the aged king-father finally stands up to a coddled son, Adonijah. It is an extraordinary accomplishment for father David and presumably a shock to the son, since "his father had never at any time displeased him by asking, 'Why have you done thus and so?' " (I Kings 1:6)

Seen in the context of the fathers-sons pattern, the text here offers a representation of David's moral improvement and toughness (a view opposed by some scholarly interpretation, which I will explore here and in chapter 7). At his physically weakest, and with a possible vacancy of spirit and mind, David nonetheless rises to the occasion, evidencing the listening capacities we have seen in the past: he is receptive to advice from good people in the interest of Israel's well-being.

Never had David confronted his son Adonijah, who had set himself up to become king. Not once—never, the text goes on to repeat redundantly, "at any time." This is an overstated and extraordinary testament to a failed father. As Mordechai Cogan notes, David has erred with Adonijah within a pattern of familial indulgence; such parochialism extends until David is lying close to death's door.[17] The narrator carefully sets the stage for the last great occasion on which the king-father will have a chance to displease his son, or not, in the face of that son's reprehensible behavior.

> Now Adonijah son of [mother] Haggith exalted himself, saying, "I will be king"; he prepared for himself chariots and horsemen, and fifty men to run before him. His father had never at any time displeased him by asking, "Why have you done thus and so?" He was also a very handsome man, and he was born next after Absalom. He conferred with Joab son of Zeruiah and with the priest Abiathar, and they supported Adonijah. (I Kings 1:5–7)

Does Adonijah think he is in line for kingship? After all, *he was born next after Absalom.* But of course there is a son born even earlier who, the audience has heard, is the special recipient of God's love: Solomon (II, 12:24; 7:12–15).

Whatever Adonijah is thinking about such matters, he is represented as being in the mold of Saul and Absalom, each of whom have built monuments to themselves:[18] Adonijah *exalted himself.* Like Absalom in his pretension to the throne, but with bolder articulation, Adonijah declares, "I will be king." Absalom had met a disastrous fate, after threatening Israel and its well-being by attempting to set himself up as king. Where is the father of these sons, the would-be kings? Where is the one true king? What has David been doing, or not doing?

Adonijah cannot do this alone, and so he builds support where he can. And whom does the self-exalting king seek out to assist him? Who among David's associates will give credence and support to Adonijah? The answer gives pause to the attentive audience: not merely *Joab,* but *Joab son of Zeruiah.* The lineage citation, while often perhaps simply descriptive as used by the narrator ("Now Joab son of Zeruiah perceived that the king's mind was on Absalom"), is a designation, for David, that is quite negative:

- "Today [after the treacherous slaying of Abner] I am powerless, even though anointed king; these men, the *sons of Zeruiah* are too violent for me. The Lord pay back the one who does wickedly in accordance with his wickedness!" (II, 3:39; emphasis here and following, mine)
- But the king said, "What have I to do with you, you *sons of Zeruiah?* If he is cursing because the Lord has said to him, 'Curse David,' who then shall say, 'Why have you done so?' " (II, 16:10)
- Abishai *son of Zeruiah* answered, "Shall not Shimei be put to death for this, because he cursed the Lord's anointed?" But David said, "What have I to do with you, you *sons of Zeruiah,* that you should today become an adversary to me? Shall anyone be put to death in Israel this day? For do I not know that I am this day king over Israel?" (II, 19:21–22)

The first citation, especially, is telling here: angry with David for agreeing to peace terms with Abner and the house of Saul, Joab had taken off after Abner. Joab brings the Saulide commander aside, as if to speak to him in private, "and there he stabbed him in the stomach" (II, 3:27).

This murder is reprehensible not only in its cowardly assault and its defiance of the king's peace treaty (deemed untenable by Joab) but in this, that Joab slayed Abner as revenge "for shedding the blood of Asahel, Joab's brother"—in battle (II, 3:27). Parochial attachment to brother overrides the commander's military sense of the appropriate, the good of the people. Within

this context, David uttered a curse on Joab and his house that includes falling by the sword (II, 3:29–30), a curse that will soon become important for the story in regard to Joab himself.

Adonijah has turned to the very same *Joab son of Zeruiah,* an alliance that makes Adonijah's ambitions even more suspect than the bare fact of his pretensions to the throne.

Adonijah also turns to Abiathar the priest, with whom, granted, nothing but good has been associated—except for this, that his priestly line, associated with Eli's dynasty, is doomed, coming to an end. In fact, even here, it ends, giving way to Israel's new and valued priestly line of Zadok.[19] Priest Zadok, in the present circumstance, favors David.

The text moves on immediately to indicate battle lines between two parties, with implicit valuations offered by the narrator: "But the priest Zadok, and Benaiah son of Jehoiada, and the prophet Nathan, and Shimei, and Rei, and David's own warriors did not side with Adonijah" (I Kings 1:8). All are presented as good characters, with the exception of Shimei, about whom I will have something to say in a moment. Rei is brand new to the story, with no prior—and no follow-up—mention.

Determining the narrative assessment of the relative merits of these two parties, as I will continue to do here, is fundamental in evaluating the wisdom of David's decision to accept or reject Adonijah's claim to kingship.

Because of the story-long pattern of fathers failing to discipline their sons, this question looms as the single most important dramatic tension in this scene from David's dying days. Will David capitulate to the designs of Adonijah, this son who never in his life had experienced the displeasure of his father (I Kings, 1:6)?

Adonijah continues his maneuvering, holding a ceremony of sacrifice to which "he invited all his brothers, the king's sons, and all the royal officials of Judah"—but "he did not invite the prophet Nathan or Benaiah or the warriors or his brother Solomon" (I Kings, 1:9–10).

Who are these not invited by Adonijah? Again: who's who in the two opposing parties? Supporting Adonijah, as we have seen, are Joab and Abiathar, both probable negatives on the score card for Adonijah supporters. Not invited, on the other hand, is Nathan, who is consistently portrayed as a good and trustworthy prophet.

And Solomon is not invited. Back when David lost his infant son of the adulterous union, we heard that "David consoled his wife Bathsheba, and went to her, and lay with her; and she bore a son, and he named him Solomon. The Lord loved him" (II, 12:24; 7:12–15). Later in the story, in an exchange of goodly words between God and David, God swears that the divine love of Solomon

will be the love of father to son; this extraordinary love will be a disciplinary love of father to son, a steadfast love, *hesed*.[20]

So it is that Adonijah has distanced himself from the two people with whom the Lord has explicitly allied himself, Solomon and the prophet Nathan.

And Adonijah does not invite Benaiah. Who do we know Benaiah to be? He is a champion among David's warriors, warriors who also are among the uninvited.

- "Benaiah son of Jehoiada was a valiant warrior from Kabzeel, a doer of great deeds; he struck down two sons of Ariel of Moab. He also went down and killed a lion in a pit on a day when snow had fallen." (II, 23:20)
- "And he killed an Egyptian, a handsome man. The Egyptian had a spear in his hand; but Benaiah went against him with a staff, snatched the spear out of the Egyptian's hand, and killed him with his own spear. Such were the things Benaiah son of Jehoiada did, and won a name beside the three warriors." (II, 23:21–22)

Benaiah, a champion of David's, is noted as missing from Adonijah's list. The noninvitees tell us something.

Nathan, the list of noninvitees begins; *Solomon,* the list ends. Immediately the text moves on, in typically laconic and compelling manner. Nathan and Solomon are again the two major figures:

> Then *Nathan* said to Bathsheba, *Solomon's* mother, "Have you not heard that Adonijah son of Haggith has become king and our lord David does not know it? Now therefore come, let me give you advice, so that you may save your own life and the life of your son *Solomon*. Go in at once to King David, and say to him, 'Did you not, my lord the king, swear to your servant, saying: Your son *Solomon* shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit on my throne? Why then is Adonijah king?' Then while you are still there speaking with the king, I will come in after you and confirm your words." (I Kings 1:11–14; emphasis mine)

Missing from Adonijah's suspect partisans, the goodly Nathan and Solomon are very much present for the decision that David will make, immediately following.

Has David so sworn to his wife Bathsheba, that "your son Solomon shall succeed me as king?" We have not heard of it. We can't know. We might think, with James Ackerman, that "David has been seduced by a prophet who has sold himself out in a bit of court intrigue,"[21] but the matter must be judged by all

narrative indicators—none of which would provide even a hint of prior misdoing or mis-thinking on Nathan's part.

First of all, Nathan's claim, even if false, is backed implicitly by God, who has declared divine love for Solomon, twice, and has promised David an heir, loved by God, who will build God a house—which Solomon does (II, 12:24; 7:12–15). Perhaps Nathan has taken prophetic license in a godly deception, or perhaps he speaks truly—though the fact that we haven't heard of this promise tilts the balance toward deception.

Second, the outcome of the proposed action by Nathan must be judged in terms other than whether or not David swore such an oath. The important narrative question is what David's response to such a claim will be in determining the kingdom's next king. How will David respond to the nefarious, spoiled son and pretender to the throne?

"So Bathsheba went to the king in his room. The king was very old; Abishag the Shunammite was attending the king" (I Kings 1:15). Remember, the text seems to suggest, that this is the once virile and lusty David, with many wives, who lies abed in the extremities of utter physical debilitation. He has been cold, and even a beautiful virgin cannot warm him—"the king did not know her sexually" (I Kings 1:1–4). Nothing but a miracle of intervention from David's friends will prevent Adonijah from realizing what may or may not be his rightful claim to the throne of David. It appears that Adonijah is as unsuited to be king as Absalom was before him.

The narrative will go on to offer an answer to this question: are these friends of David working for the communal good, or are their intentions evil?

Bathsheba enters the king's chamber, bows before him.

> The king said, "What do you wish?"
>
> She said to him, "My lord, you swore to your servant by the Lord your God, saying: 'Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit on my throne.' But now suddenly Adonijah has become king, though you, my lord the king, do not know it." (I Kings 1:16–18)

This is true, and shocking; just as David the father could not see his son Amnon's love-sickness for a half-sister, so, too, David the father is blind to son Adonijah's usurpation of the throne.

Bathsheba concludes, coming to the rhetorical point that cues Nathan's appearance (is he eavesdropping?):

> "But you, my lord the king—the eyes of all Israel are on you to tell them who shall sit on the throne of my lord the king after

> him. . . . Otherwise it will come to pass, when my lord the king sleeps with his ancestors, that my son Solomon and I will be counted offenders." (I Kings 1:20–21)

Nathan the prophet appears immediately, on cue—according to a script he himself has provided.

> While she was still speaking with the king, the prophet Nathan came in. The king was told, "Here is the prophet Nathan." When he came in before the king, he did obeisance to the king, with his face to the ground.
>
> Nathan said, "My lord the king, have you said, 'Adonijah shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit on my throne'? For today he has gone down and has sacrificed oxen, fatted cattle, and sheep in abundance, and has invited all the king's children, Joab the commander of the army, and the priest Abiathar, who are now eating and drinking before him, and saying, *Long live King Adonijah!* But he did not invite me, your servant, and the priest Zadok, and Benaiah son of Jehoiada, and your servant Solomon. Has this thing been brought about by my lord the king and you have not let your servants know who should sit on the throne of my lord the king after him?" (I Kings 1:22–27)

Strikingly, we do not hear of the king's presumed prior selection of Solomon from Nathan—only this: *have you said, 'Adonijah shall succeed me as king'?* Whether or not David had promised that Solomon would take the throne becomes something of a moot point, then: the important question concerns the coddled son, a pretender to the throne. It is Adonijah with whom David the father must deal—to rise up from bed, as it were, and become once again the king he ought to be, a king who finally triumphs over the indulgent father.

And we hear something else that is striking, some added words that are underlined rhetorically by their not having been part of Bathsheba's speech or in what Nathan had originally instructed Bathsheba to say. Bathsheba has mentioned, pointedly, that Adonijah had not invited "your servant Solomon" to his coronation party. But now we hear from Nathan about the three added noninvitees: *me, your servant, and the priest Zadok, and Benaiah son of Jehoiada.*

The narrator has already told us of these omissions from Adonijah's list, but in this dramatic scene of the king's getting apprised, the narrator saves the key words for Nathan. As discussed, each of the three—Nathan, Zadok, and Benaiah—bear special narrative weight in judging David's response to Bathsheba and Nathan.

So here again are "the good guys" versus "the bad guys": how will David decide? To whom will he pay heed? Will he recall the son favored by God, loved by God, chosen by God as heir to himself? (II, 12:24; 7:12–15) How will the king respond?

> King David answered, "Summon Bathsheba to me." So she came into the king's presence, and stood before the king.
>
> The king swore, saying, "As the Lord lives, who has saved my life from every adversity, as I swore to you by the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit on my throne in my place,' so will I do this day."
>
> Then Bathsheba bowed with her face to the ground, and did obeisance to the king, and said, "May my lord King David live forever!" (I Kings 1:28–31)

His life [saved] from every adversity, David has been facing the greatest adversity of all: an imbalance between kingly rule and fatherly indulgence.

Nathan's failure to underscore Bathsheba's words about having promised Solomon as heir makes no difference in terms of what registers for David in this particular situation as appropriate: "*As I swore to you by the Lord, the God of Israel,*" says David, '*Your son Solomon shall succeed me as king, and he shall sit on my throne in my place,' so will I do this day.*"

Either David had sworn such an oath, in keeping with God's steadfast love for Solomon, or he hadn't. In the former case, Nathan spoke truly. In the latter case, David's cleverness and rightness of thinking would be in even more clear evidence than his otherwise salutary confirmation of what Bathsheba and Nathan have urged.

As is so often the case with patterns of repetition in biblical narrative, it is the twist of the last entry that tells the tale. What breaks this pattern of fathers-sons-death is the strength of a father standing up to an ill-directed son—displeasing that son for the sake of a greater communal good. That David's breakthrough as father occurs as he lies dying, so weak, accentuates by contrast his resurgence of mind and will. His words ring out assertively, emphatically—a narrative opportunity to view a fully roused King David in a moment of glory:

> King David said, "Summon to me the priest Zadok, the prophet Nathan, and Benaiah son of Jehoiada."
>
> When they came before the king, the king said to them, "Take with you the servants of your lord, and have my son Solomon

> ride on my own mule, and bring him down to Gihon. There let the priest Zadok and the prophet Nathan anoint him king over Israel; then blow the trumpet, and say, 'Long live King Solomon!' You shall go up following him. Let him enter and sit on my throne; he shall be king in my place; for I have appointed him to be ruler over Israel and over Judah." (I Kings 1:32–35)

Almost immediately we hear that David's "time to die drew near" (II, 2:1). Here, the specificity and certainty of speech indicates a finally triumphant David.

> So the priest Zadok, the prophet Nathan, and Benaiah son of Jehoiada, and the Cherethites and the Pelethites, went down and had Solomon ride on King David's mule, and led him to Gihon. There the priest Zadok took the horn of oil from the tent and anointed Solomon.
>
> Then they blew the trumpet, and all the people said, "Long live King Solomon!"
>
> And *all the people* went up following him, playing on pipes and *rejoicing with great joy*, so that *the earth quaked* at their noise. (I Kings 1:38–41; emphasis mine)

Adonijah hears the tumult, and expects it to be the good news of Israel rejoicing about his ascension to the throne. He discovers otherwise (I Kings 1:41–46).

By way of a secondhand report, the narrator returns us, in a flashback, to the bed of King David, where we have seen David enfeebled, apparently dying. The words about David's recovery are spoken to a shaken Adonijah:

> "Solomon now sits on the royal throne. Moreover the king's servants came to congratulate our lord King David, saying, 'May God make the name of Solomon more famous than yours, and make his throne greater than your throne.'"
>
> The king bowed in worship on the bed and went on to pray thus, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who today has granted one of my offspring to sit on my throne and permitted me to witness it." (I Kings 1:47–48)

The king bowed in worship on the bed, a bed that initially suggested only David's general stupor. But now David, from his bed, praises the God of Israel for this decision inspired by friends, a choice of precisely the *"one of [David's] offspring"* for whom God had declared a kingly house.

"David, bedridden, lowered his head in appreciation and acquiescence that YHWH had permitted him to see the peaceful transfer of the throne to his chosen successor," Mordechai Cogan comments, and refers us to "the similar gesture of Jacob in his final days, Genesis 47:31."[22] That he bows in worship, praising God, proves nothing as to whether David had taken the vow to anoint Solomon, but everything in the king's acquiescence to what the text indicates is the proper decision.

For the first time in Adonijah's life, his father has made a decision that displeases the son, an implicit *no,* halting the downward trajectory of David's rule as king because of his role as wrongly-loving father. Here is perhaps the most important reversal of the story. In saying no to Adonijah and in declaring Solomon king, David the father has risen to the heights of David the king, able to relinquish his title and responsibility in favor of the right successor, one whom God loves.[23]

David is in a position to speak wisdom to a son, the new king of Israel, the first dynastic king of the house of David.

But here, a possible caveat: earlier, David, having made up his mind, has asked for Zadok, Nathan, and Benaiah. Missing from this list of supporters, good characters all, is Shimei—a bad fellow. Might this list of three supporters alone not give some pause to the story's audience? There was, after all, that other anti-Adonijah character in the original listing: "But the priest Zadok, and Benaiah son of Jehoiada, and the prophet Nathan, and Shimei, and Rei, and David's own warriors did not side with Adonijah" (I Kings 1:8). Perhaps Shimei is meant by the narrator as an indicator that cancels out any sanguine view of the Solomon supporters.

We recall: Shimei's foul invective, with David fleeing Absalom, centered on the accusation that David had orchestrated slaughter against the house of Saul. As shown in chapter 5, hotheaded Abishai (another *son of Zeruiah*) had advised David to slay the foulmouthed Shimei. David had responded: *no, perhaps God is behind those curses; perhaps I am blameworthy*. Shimei's cursing, it turns out, functioned positively, awakening—or bringing to the point of articulation—David's sense of wrongdoing: *perhaps I am blameworthy*. On David's return to Jerusalem, as Israel's undisputed king, Shimei is among the first to welcome David. Shimei apologizes, profusely, for the former cursing. While circumspect at the very least, this apology might have contained something sincere as well. David spares the life of this one who hurled curses at the Lord's anointed. After David's death, Shimei, though he brings it on himself, will be slain (I will have more to say about this soon).

The king, then, has listened to those deemed within the narrative as worthy, with the possible exception of Shimei. What we find is an energized David

taking over for a generally enfeebled David. The wisdom David imparts to his son Solomon—a perspicacity both politically realistic and God-devoted—has been prepared for, narratively, by the conspicuous lack of the father's wisdom with prior sons.

This wisdom consists in David's understanding of two things: the conditionality of the divine covenant, requiring a God-devotedness, and the need for political realism to accompany the covenant keeping.

"If your heirs take heed to their way," David begins, "to walk before [God] in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel" (I Kings 2:4).[24] However much an overlay of differing sources and different time periods of story construction, the integrity of the story as a whole is supported by a conditionality implicit in the entire story. God goes back on the promise of an everlasting dynasty of priests to Eli, *because*. . . . And God unchooses Saul as king, *because*. . . . Such wisdom as David's, articulating the conditionality of God's favor, very well might reveal the king's coming to grips with his own failures as father in the light of finally correcting that failure. Uncorrected wrongdoing could have threatened communal well-being for the people of God, with God withdrawing the promise, as in the case of Eli. Though Israel under Solomon enjoys only a short period of well-being, that communal *shalom* is complete (see chapter 5). Israel in exile has this memory, this ideal: an ideal king by whom all kings are measured, and a communal well-being that was once obtained, and could be regained. David speaks well, and from what he has learned.

But there follows a rather ruthless sort of wisdom, if wisdom it is. David is looking back and looking forward at the same time in advising Solomon in the realm of political realities. Two offenders from the past must be taken care of: Joab and Shimei. Shimei is a complicated case, and I will take extra time to explore the narrative details that form an interpretive context.

Strong and certain of speech, David continues.

> "Moreover, you know what Joab son of Zeruiah did to me . . . how he dealt with the two commanders of the armies of Israel, Abner son of Ner, and Amasa son of Jether, [both of] whom he murdered, retaliating in time of peace for blood that had been shed in war, and putting the blood of war on the belt around his waist, and on the sandals on his feet. Act therefore according to your wisdom, but do not let his gray head go down to Sheol in peace." (I Kings 2:5–6)

What David has learned, beginning with Abigail (chapter 4), is the evil of incurring bloodguilt, of acting murderously in a vengeful manner: "Now then," Abigail had said to David, "as the Lord lives, and as you yourself live,

since the Lord has restrained you from bloodguilt and from taking vengeance with your own hand, now let your enemies and those who seek to do evil to my lord be like Nabal" (I, 25:26). David subsequently practices this key lesson well, with the exception of the killing of Uriah. As horrible as this attempt at cover-up was, the act had no vengefulness attached to it, and it is an act for which David confesses wrong with no word of defense.

Joab has killed twice, in cold blood, in peacetime. He murdered Abner in revenge for Abner's killing of Joab's brother Asahel, in self-defense. Joab has also killed Amasa in cold blood, for indeterminate reasons. Possibly, Joab is bothered because of a vague delay on Amasa's part in bringing men of Judah to David (II, 20:4); or perhaps because Joab is deeply bothered by David's replacing him with Amasa.

> When they were at the large stone that is in Gibeon Amasa came to meet them. Now Joab was wearing a soldier's garment and over it was a belt with a sword in its sheath fastened at his waist; as he went forward it fell out. Joab said to Amasa, "Is it well with you, my brother?" And Joab took Amasa by the beard with his right hand to kiss him. But Amasa did not notice the sword in Joab's hand; Joab struck him in the belly so that his entrails poured out on the ground, and he died. He did not strike a second blow. (II, 20:8–10)

The writer's highlighting of David's precise wording in the words to Solomon, then, is significant: Joab was guilty, David says, of "*retaliating in time of peace* for blood that had been shed in war. . . . Act therefore," he says to Solomon, "according to your wisdom, but do not let [Joab's] gray head go down to Sheol in peace" (I Kings 2:5–6; emphasis mine). Joab's presence as commander had been crucial for David in the particular phase of Israel's well-being, under David's rule. But now is the time, as Jeffery Rogers sees, for a just exacting of the terms of the original curse David had uttered.[25] There is possible ambiguity here, insofar as David's curse on Joab included mention of the Lord: "The Lord pay back the one [Joab] who does wickedly in accordance with his wickedness!" (II, 3:39) Is David asking Solomon to usurp the prerogatives of the Lord, or to be the Lord's instrument?

Presumably David is aware, as well, of the problems Solomon might encounter with a commander who supported the wrong candidate for king, Adonijah.

Both in the original curse and in this word to Solomon, then, David is shown exercising appropriate and important leadership. As Joel Rosenberg notes, and as we have seen throughout this story, the good of the nation, its well-being, is at stake—that about which God's loyalty is steadfast and unchanging:

"David's censure of Joab establishes the role of the monarch as one who will stand above and restrain the volatile and chaotic motions of tribal conflict."[26]

The other person David assigns to the responsibility of Solomon is Shimei, whom David had pardoned.

> There is also with you Shimei son of Gera, the Benjaminite from Bahurim, who cursed me with a terrible curse on the day when I went to Mahanaim; but when he came down to meet me at the Jordan, I swore to him by the Lord, 'I will not put you to death with the sword.' Therefore do not hold him guiltless, for you are a wise man; you will know what you ought to do to him, and you must bring his gray head down with blood to Sheol. (I Kings 2:8–9)

Regard for the Lord's anointed has been a refrain for David, one he himself demonstrated in the sparing, twice, of King Saul (I, 24, 26). Solomon and the monarchic line to follow must enjoy what David has been insisting on all along, respect for the office of the king anointed by God. Shimei's death will be deserved, and an example for all Israel.

Rather than execution at the point of Shimei's cursing the Lord's anointed, David waited. First of all, as we have seen, he thinks Shimei may have a point in the verbal insults. Only time and God will determine, says David, whether he himself is deserving of such slander (II, 16:5–14). But then, on his way home, back to the throne, David is met by a profusely apologizing Shimei. David pardons him, granting Shimei what turns out to be a period of clemency. Perhaps David is revealing not just mercy but political savvy: David's house has, in Shimei, support from a Saulide, a former zealot in fact.

At the time of David's last words to Solomon, Shimei had been enjoying the king's favor for some period of time. With David's approaching death, Shimei's time of is nearly up. Such action as David urges on his son regarding Shimei is certainly strong, emphatic, clear, and maybe appropriate—but is it not also a bit sneaky, or hypocritical? David's promise had been unequivocal: "The king said to Shimei, 'You shall not die.' And the king gave him his oath" (II, 19:23). Could this constitute a promise that, only while David is alive, Shimei shall live—that David himself will protect Shimei's life? With Solomon, David apparently interprets matters this way: "I swore to him by the Lord, '*I* will not put you to death.' "

Shimei has enjoyed, presumably, many good days. From a commonly held perspective, however, David cowardly shirks the onerous executions of Shimei and Joab. From another angle of vision, at least with Shimei, David has courageously and graciously accepted Shimei's apology, extending his years until the point where David himself dies. In between these two views is that of Robert Pinsky, who points aptly to a political acumen requiring of David what we have

seen frequently: restraint. "The dying man's vindictive for gray-haired Shimei to have a bloody end makes the more impressive David's restraint years earlier, when it was more politic to spare the ineffectual spitter of insults. And the restraint itself appears the more clearly to have less to do with mercy than with cool, mafioso calculation."[27] *Less to do with mercy:* but "less" does not rule out mercy entirely.

As Jeffery Rogers notes, Shimei will end up doing something foolish—however set up by Solomon—to bring death on himself, while also serving the implicit "sentence" of those who would rail against the Lord's anointed.[28]

The alternative view of David's shirking the unpleasant, among other problems, has the difficulty of explaining why David might not have relished living, for however short an amount of days, with the satisfaction of revenge. Has he not put himself in a position of being deprived of this satisfaction by postponing the business until after his death?

Sandwiched between these two brief death sentences we find an echo back to the most tender aspect of David's capacities as a leader, as if the narrator is insisting that David is not in a particularly bloody-minded mood. "Deal loyally," David says to Solomon, "with the sons of Barzillai the Gileadite, and let them be among those who eat at your table; for with such loyalty they met me when I fled from your brother Absalom" (I Kings 2:7). As I will show in chapter 8, it is Barzillai who commands a great deal of attention in an otherwise typically laconic narrative, back when David returns to his throne after fleeing Absalom. Barzillai and David are old and loyal friends, and the anecdote exists for no other reason than to indicate the quality of care and good-hearted exchange existing between Israel's king and a thoughtful commoner, one of the people (II, 19:31–38; chapters 5 and 8).

Solomon has caught the spirit of his father's perspective. After his father dies, but before dealing with Joab and Shimei, the new king is faced with a power move by Adonijah, who has approached Bathsheba.

> He said, "You know that the kingdom was mine, and that all Israel expected me to reign; however, the kingdom has turned about and become my brother's, for it was his from the Lord. And now I have one request to make of you; do not refuse me."
>
> She said to him, "Go on."
>
> He said, "Please ask King Solomon—he will not refuse you—to give me Abishag the Shunammite as my wife." (I Kings 2:15–17)

Solomon hears the request from his mother, and is properly alarmed at the effrontery of his brother's request. "Ask for him the kingdom as well!" he responds, "and also for the priest Abiathar and for Joab the son of Zeruiah!"

Solomon takes an oath before the Lord: "Today Adonijah shall be put to death" (I Kings 2:22, 24). "Solomon's outrage," as Robert Pinsky understands, "is not so much righteous as practical, the voice of brute common sense affronted. The notion of Adonijah having Abishag, who ministered to David, is for Solomon tantamount to giving the kingdom to his enemies—not just to Adonijah, but to the priest Abiathar and the not-yet-seen-to general Joab as well."[29]

The instruction given Solomon is understood, a wisdom indicating David's return to the vigorous command of affairs indicated already in his just-prior choice of Solomon as king, and his saying no to Adonijah.[30] Friends prompting, yes, but the text was clear about David's emergence from stupor. His language, as we saw, was crisp, clear, and decisive—carrying results. *Summon Bathsheba,* David has said, and then another command: *Summon Zadok* (I Kings 1:28, 32). Benaiah the warrior champion knew a command when he heard one: *Amen! May the Lord, the God of my lord the king, so ordain,* he had responded. On David's part, there has been no sign of anything but clarity of vision and decisiveness.

A typical interpretive option is to assume that the opening verses of I Kings, citing David's failure of body and wit, is definitive: David is weak of body and mind, and goes downhill from there.[31] That many scholars thus equate David's physical incapacities and apparent vagary of mind as indicative of his final decline as king—rather than as foil to his arousal as king and finally appropriate father would seem to ignore the interrelated patterns of failed fathers and responses to death news (chapter 7) that lead up to this climactic end to the story proper of David's rise to royalty and his reign.[32]

The twist in the final instance of failed fathers, David's saying no to Adonijah, reveals a reversal perfectly in keeping with the single purpose for which God has chosen David: to lead the sheep, Israel—to bring a united kingdom into an experience of justice, equity, and well-being. Impotent, the king's power of mind and spirit are roused for the sake of Israel's well-being, with the help of key friends, against the machinations of questionable characters—both groups, "good guys and bad guys," carefully highlighted by the narrator. Communal well-being alone is the one thing the story has insisted that God is unchanging about. Such is on fullest display, for a while, under Solomon. This is David's choice for king, a king, we are told, who is loved by God (II, 7:12–15; 12:24–25).

Conclusion

David's punishment for the Bathsheba-Uriah affair—that "the sword shall never depart from your house" and that God will give David's wives/concubines

to someone who will "lie with [them] in the sight of this very sun"[33]—combines with the king's subsequent familial indulgence to produce communal chaos. Amnon's incestuous malfeasance and Absalom's fratricide echo, respectively, the father's adultery and murder. As is often the case in biblical narrative, the roles of the divine and human characters in bringing both weal and woe overlap, reinforcing one another. God promises the never-departing sword and the concubine travesty as a consequence for David's initial wrongdoings, while at the same time David himself plays a major role in continuing to foment the mayhem assigned by God. David's negligence as father creates the circumstances for the same never-departing sword and sexual disgrace.

At risk in this father-son dynamic shared by Eli and David is nothing less than God's promise to David—did we think it unconditional?—of a permanent "house," a royal line with no end (II, 7:10–13). Precisely this sort of presumably unconditional promise of an everlasting line was made to Eli, a divine promise that God takes back. Why would this story's God not, similarly, be able to suspend the promise to David, whose honoring of sons appears as egregious as anything Eli did or did not do as a father? Will God renege, also, on the promise to David?

Walter Brueggemann rehearses what seems quite obvious from the biblical text concerning God's promise to Eli. Quoting the central biblical passage on the matter ("I promised [says God] that your family and the family of your ancestor should go in and out before me forever," I, 2:30), Brueggemann comments: "The conduct of [Eli's] sons is so outrageous, however, that even this unconditional promise previously voiced by YHWH to Eli must now be voided. The voiding of an unconditional promise of YHWH of course is an extremity."[34] What keeps David's case from qualifying as just such "an extremity"?

Something *is* different between David and God. We have here either an arbitrary and majestically inscrutable God or, as I have been trying to demonstrate from the story, a God who works with whom God can. There is something about David . . . To the extent that the narrative uncovers the mystery of David while explaining God's designation and continuing support of David as leader of God's people, to that extent the text solves not only the puzzles concerning the character of David, but of God as well.[35]

From within the patterns of repetition, like failed fathers, the text yields its answers. Finally, with son Adonijah, King David the father reverses field—a striking twist in the pattern of failed fathers that includes Eli. David does, finally, what Eli, in the last analysis, failed to do.

How, finally, is David to be evaluated from within the perspective of mostly conflicting roles of father and king? The answer, for the narrator, is crucial for

Pattern Eight: Failed Fathers, Death of Sons, Communal Chaos

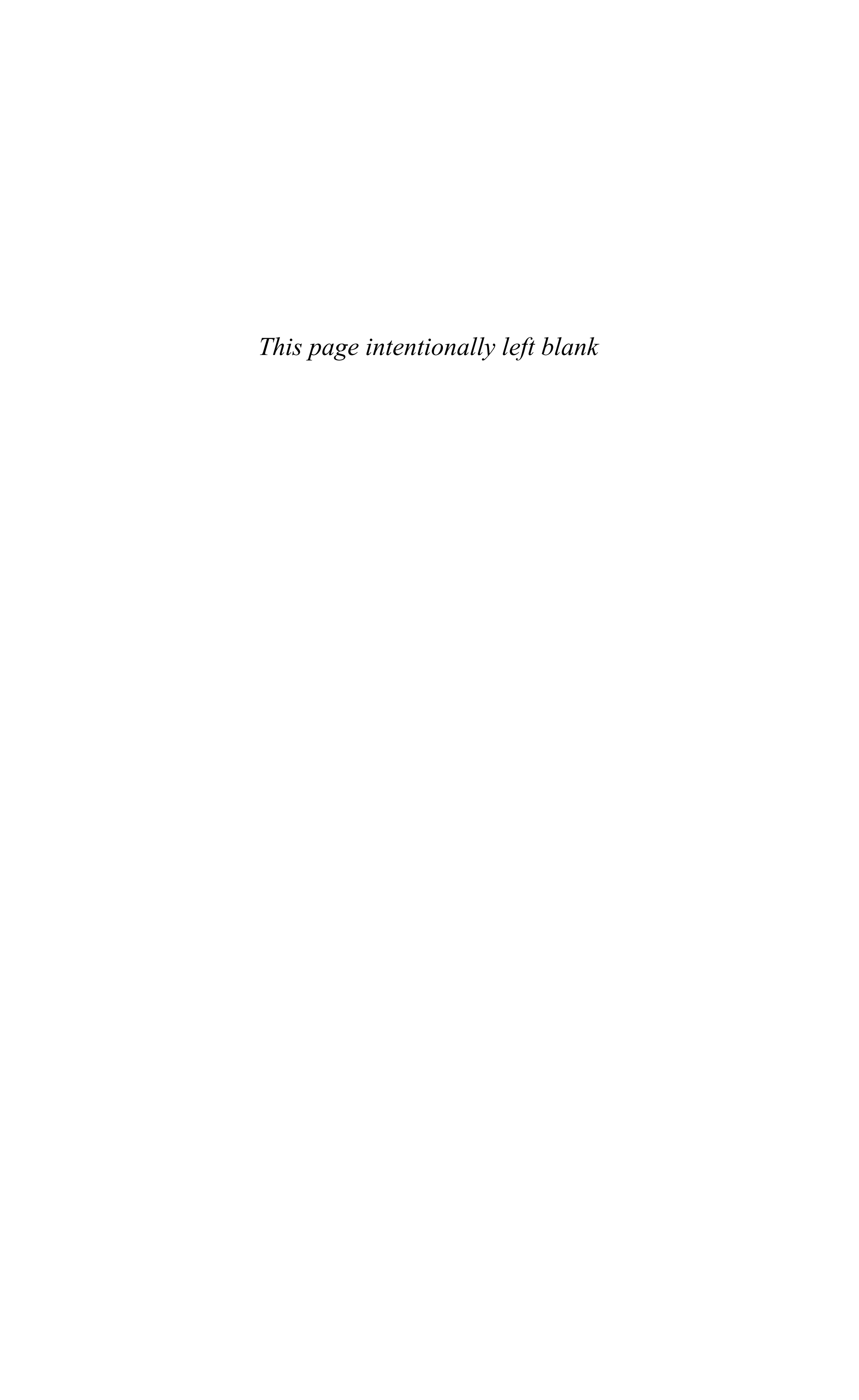
	ELI & HIS TWO SONS (I Sam 2:12–4:22)	DAVID & 1st SON (by Bathsheba) (II Sam 11:2–12:25)	DAVID & 2nd SON (Amnon) (II Sam 13:1–39)	DAVID & 3rd SON (Absalom) (II Sam 13:1–19:9)	DAVID & 4th SON (Adonijah) (I Kings 1–2)
Sons' Wrongdoing	Eli's two priest-sons: *scoundrels*, taking what belonged to God and the people.		Amnon rapes half-sister Tamar.	Absalom kills Amnon; later, Absalom is treasonous.	Adonijah is treasonous.
Fathers' Wrongdoing	Eli fails to disciple his two sons, honoring them more than God.	David impregnates another's wife; has husband killed.	David does nothing; Amnon not disciplined.	David fails to discipline son Absalom (fratricide).	David has failed to disciple son Adonijah (becomes treasonous).
Consequences, Familial	Eli's two sons die in battle; Eli dies upon hearing of sons' death; ark gone.	Infant son of David's adultery dies (God's discipline).	Son Amnon killed by his brother Absalom (for the rape of Tamar).	Son Absalom killed in battle (insurrection against father's troops).	Son Adonijah (ultimately) killed by brother Solomon.
Consequences, Communal	Israel defeated; ark lost to enemy; while ark is on the way back, 70 Israelites die for not rejoicing.	David responds well to God's judgment and continues to rule Israel well.	We hear nothing of David's rule: narrator focuses on Amnon and Absalom.	Absalom tries to set himself up as king, plunging Israel into civil war: communal chaos.	Civil war and communal chaos narrowly avoided.

the future well-being of Israel. Blame for Israel's chaotic state, early in the story, involves the failed father, Eli. His indulged sons do wrong to the point of the ark's loss and their own untimely death.

In part because of David's paternal indulgence, his son Amnon dies—after committing incestuous rape; the king is not reported as paying attention to kingdom affairs. David's paternal indulgence, likewise, leads both to Israel's being plunged into the chaos of civil war and to the tragic death of son Absalom. Because of David's paternal indulgence, son Adonijah sets himself up as king, precipitating the possibility of another civil war in Israel. Adonijah, like Absalom, could have died an untimely death, grieving the father. Or he could have been successful where Absalom failed.

But David has finally said *no* to a son, heeding the news from Nathan and Bathsheba of his son's malfeasance. The great twist in the pattern tells the important tale. David the king rises above David the indulgent father. In so doing, the king honors God, whose anointed he is—for the sake of providing Israel, God's people, communal well-being. So this story has it.

Within this pattern of failed fathers we find an interlocking pattern: the delivery by messengers of death news that includes fathers' sons. Other instances of David's manner of receiving death news add to a pattern that greatly enriches the narrator's characterization of David. In early II Samuel, David is shown responding in crucial fashion to death news regarding King Saul and Jonathan, the Saulide commander Abner, and the heir apparent to the throne, Saul's son Ishbaal. Within the context of the entire pattern, David's communally dispiriting cry on hearing news of son Absalom's death is seen as a turning point, an immediate prelude to the king's about-face with son Adonijah.



7

News of Death—Public and Private Davids

Pattern 9

Before hearing about how David the father faces hearing news concerning three successive sons' deaths, we are shown David's response to death news of three successive political opponents, or would-be opponents. II Samuel begins with David receiving news the audience has already heard: that King Saul has been slain in battle, along with son Jonathan. In quick narrative succession, David receives news that two potential opponents have been slain, treacherously: Abner, the commander of Saul's troops, and Ishbaal, son of Saul and heir to Saul's crown. Taken together, the six instances of David's responding to death news, preceded by the Eli instance of responding to the same news, repeat formal elements in such a way as to shed increased light on the complexity of David.

The tension between the private and public Davids, for example, comes into clearer focus, setting the narrative stage for a seventh instance, an epilogue of sorts, of private David working in sync with public David, toward communal well-being.

Public-Private Eli: Death News, Sons (I, 4:10–18)
Public David 1, Death News: Saul and Jonathan (II, 1:1–27)
Public David 2, Death News: Abner (Saul's Commander) (II, 3:28–39)
Public David 3, Death News: Ishbaal, Saul's son (II, 4:5–12)
Father David 1, Death News: Infant Son (II, 12:15–24)
Father David 2, Death News: Son Amnon (II, 13:21–39)

Public-Private Eli: Death News, Sons (I, 4:10–18)

As an introduction and backdrop to David's receiving news of death six times, the narrative provides us a first instance, a backdrop and something of a template. As explored in chapter 6, Eli's failure to discipline his two evildoing sons has led to Eli's loss of God's promise for an everlasting line of priests, of his own two sons, and Israel's loss of the ark.

Eli, leader and father, awaits news from the battle, into which the ark of the covenant has been taken, accompanied by Hophni and Phinehas. A messenger comes with the news: the ark has been lost to the enemy and the two sons have been killed. Eli topples from his seat at the gate, dead. Israel has lost a priest, one who has judged at this same seat at the gate. And Israel experiences a conspicuous absence of well-being.

Public David 1, Death News: Saul and Jonathan (II, 1:1–27)

I Samuel ends with the narrator's account of Saul's suicide on the battlefield, and the death of his son Jonathan (I, 31).

II Samuel begins with a repeated version of Saul's death, told by a messenger to David. We do not know whether the king already knows.

> After the death of Saul, when David had returned from defeating the Amalekites, David remained two days in Ziklag. On the third day, a man came from Saul's camp, with his clothes torn and dirt on his head. When he came to David, he fell to the ground and did obeisance.
>
> David said to him, "Where have you come from?"
>
> He said to him, "I have escaped from the camp of Israel."
>
> David said to him, "How did things go? Tell me!"
>
> He answered, "The army fled from the battle, but also many of the army fell and died; and Saul and his son Jonathan also died." (II, 1:1–4)

Why two accounts, this one and the prior, given by the narrator at the end of I Samuel? Always there is the likelihood of differing traditions behind the text

as we have it, but always our question is to discover how our narrator weaves it all together.

An aspect of the tapestry weaving lies in the striking difference in what the messenger goes on to relate about the circumstances surrounding the king's death.

> The young man reporting to him said, "I happened to be on Mount Gilboa; and there was Saul leaning on his spear, while the chariots and the horsemen drew close to him. When he looked behind him, he saw me, and called to me. I answered, 'Here sir.'
>
> And he said to me, "Who are you?"
>
> He said to me, "Come, stand over me and kill me; for convulsions have seized me, and yet my life still lingers."
>
> I stood over him, and killed him. (1:6–10)

As a way of underlining his ingratiating intentions, the messenger presents to David the dead king's crown and armlet. We know the messenger is lying—the narrator, in charge of the prior account of suicide, is always reliable—so our attention is entirely on how David responds both to the death news and to the messenger. First, David mourns.

> Then David took hold of his clothes and tore them; and all the men who were with him did the same. They mourned and wept, and fasted until evening for Saul and for his son Jonathan, and for the army of the Lord and for the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword. (II, 11–14)

David's mourning appears sincere: the narrator adds the detail that there was great weeping "for the army of the Lord and for the house of Israel"—a house to which David will aspire, or has been aspiring. Then interrupting his mourning, which will continue, David responds to the messenger.

> David said to the young man who had reported to him, "Where do you come from?"
>
> He answered, "I am the son of a resident alien, an Amalekite."
>
> David said to him, "Were you not afraid to lift your hand to destroy the Lord's anointed?" (II, 1:13–14)

David has the messenger slain with words that reiterate a motif concerning *the Lord's anointed:* "Your blood be on your head; for your own mouth has testified against you, saying, 'I have killed the Lord's anointed' " (II, 1:15–16).[1] That the messenger, professed killer, is an Amalekite presumably does not help

his case: Amalekites have been Israel's nemesis ever since the exodus from Egypt—those whom Saul did not destroy utterly.

Standing before David, the Amalekite offers what we know to be a fabrication. Whether David knows what we know is beside the point: enough that the Amalekite claims to do that which David has refrained from doing on the two occasions when the opportunity presented itself (I, 24 and 26; chapter 3). "Your mouth has testified against you," David says to the Amalekite, avoiding any need to investigate the truth of the messenger's claim: the audaciousness of such a claim proves sufficient grounds for death (I, 1:16). David's condemnation rings true, while evidencing once again great political savvy in promoting a hands-off policy toward the Lord's anointed, a kingship toward which David himself is heading.

The narrator returns us to David's mourning, the Amalekite interlude functioning as a bridge between the public rite of mourning—David and his men tore their clothes, mourned, wept, and fasted, and a more private mourning, albeit before the people.

"David intoned this lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan" (I, 11–17). What follows is a remembrance of both the slain king and his son. The poem includes this encomium, at once martial and personal.

> From the blood of the slain,
> from the fat of the mighty,
> the bow of Jonathan did not turn back,
> nor the sword of Saul return empty.
> Saul and Jonathan, beloved and lovely!
> In life and in death they were not divided;
> they were swifter than eagles,
> they were stronger than lions. (II, 1:22–23)

We find here not only the highest regard for Saul, the Lord's anointed, but also an expression of David's deep love for Saul's son Jonathan.

Saul and Jonathan, *beloved* . . . David follows up with what might appear to be a digression from the focus on a fallen king, a quite personal sense of loss:

> I am distressed for you, my brother Jonathan;
> greatly beloved were you to me;
> your love to me was wonderful,
> passing the love of women. (I, 1:26)

Might David be declaring prior emotional attachment to the king's son for present political gain? Is David's poetic expression of grief and love to be trusted?

But surely David's expression of love would be unnecessary and distracting in a eulogy focusing on the greatness of the deceased king and his son. Furthermore, David's confessed love for Jonathan is for someone whose heart "was bound to the soul of David, and . . . loved him as his own soul, who "took great delight in David" and "loved [David] as he loved his own life" (I, 18:1; 19:1; 20:17).

Again, might not David be feigning such grief, such love? Recall that Jonathan had yielded his right to the throne as heir in favor of David (I:18:4). What of David's lack of affect at that time, in responding to Jonathan's love and transference of power? Under great duress because of Saul's mad jealousy, David's reaction to Jonathan had to be somewhat guarded. Jonathan himself is in danger because of David. Jonathan has had his father's spear hurled at him because of his son's favorable response to David, and David presumably understands the precarious nature of the situation. David fears for his own life, and might very well be concerned that reciprocally expressed love between son and David would endanger Jonathan. "Your father knows well," David has said, "that you like me; and he thinks, 'Do not let Jonathan know this' " (I, 20:2–3). Jonathan's danger would have been compounded by common knowledge that David, in turn, loved Jonathan. Bad enough, for Saul, that Jonathan loves David so openly. Given, then, that David's potential political gain from Jonathan's love was perceived as a threat by King Saul (I, 20:24–31; 23:15–18), David's prior silence about his love for Jonathan has been politically shrewd, but also personally considerate.

But just before David takes flight from Saul for good, the narrator has added a seemingly gratuitous note that probably allows a glimpse into David's heart regarding his affection and regard for Jonathan: the two friends finally have to part; they embrace, weeping, and "David wept the more" (I, 20: 41). Tear for tear would have sufficed, if David's response to Jonathan was purely political, assuring Jonathan's future support. And the narrative has established what David must know: Jonathan's attachment to David is complete—including the handing over of royal claims (I, 18:4). Now, in the eulogy, we find David putting into words all that apparently lay behind that "weeping the more," a love that is sublime, above the love of a man for a woman. This proclaimed love for Jonathan is nicely captured with "I am stressed—in distress," which can also read "I am in a desperate plight," a phrase David uses later when he is forced by God to choose among severe punishments for the people of Israel (II, 24:14). Unless we insist that David's heightened expression of a bond is possibly a pose, as some suggest, that which we might have previously been given to assume[2] is here confirmed: Jonathan was greatly beloved by David. What might appear a gratuitous detour from a eulogy centering on the king's death appears to be the

narrator's oppotunity to disclose what lay in David's heart. In response to news of his friend's death, David can finally express all that he has felt toward Saul's son Jonathan. Such compassionate depths will receive further narrative notice, along with my comments.

Of course, such expression of love for not only the king but also his son can only benefit the king-to-be, raising David's standing in the eyes of all Israel. Considering this entire sequence of responding to death news, we are put in position of considering whether there might be the possibility of a synergy between such deeply felt emotion and political gain. Either/or seems a bit simplistic, as in a reading that David stands to gain from Saul's death, and therefore he must secretly rejoice at the Amalekite's news. The Amalekite's motive, in this view, presages the presumed darkness of David's political maneuvering and posturing in II Samuel.[3] But even here, details related to the Amalekite's death sentence recall David's prior out-in-the-open declamations against lifting a hand against the Lord's anointed. Even to have lifted his hand to cut a piece of the royal garment, when David could have killed his pursuer, argues for the sincerity of David's motives—which include, certainly, political foresight.

The story suggests that private attachments such as David's love for Jonathan, handled with circumspection, need not thwart political responsibility. David's responses to death news regarding three sons, later in the narrative, find much of their meaning in the light of his response to the death of King Saul and his dear friend Jonathan. The present instance of the pattern will prove to be an instructive foil for the unseemly and harmful mourning of David at hearing news of Absalom's death.

David concludes with a repetition of lines appearing earlier in his poetic eulogy: "How the mighty have fallen" (II, 1:19,25,27).

The narrator moves immediately to that which confirms the God-driven trajectory of David's political agenda. "After this David inquired of the Lord,

> "Shall I go up into any of the cities of Judah?"
> The Lord said to him, "Go up."
> David said, "To which shall I go up?"
> He said, "To Hebron"
> So David went up there . . . (II, 2:1–2)

From mourning to political thought and action, David is shown as moving nimbly, with God's helpful responses.

The immediate future is challenging for David in a way entirely different from, less easy than, martial affairs. The next two instances of the death-news

pattern continue in rapid succession, David hearing about the deaths of political opponents, or would-be opponents.

Public David 2, Death News: Abner (Saul's Commander) (II, 3:28–39)

Abner, commander of Saul's army, is slain treacherously by David's own commander, Joab. Ishbaal, the son of Saul has been appointed king of "all Israel" by Abner (II, 2: 8–11).[4] Soon after Abner's death, Ishbaal is slain—again, treacherously. In each instance, we find significant mention of David's response of mourning, responses that appear both appropriate and genuine.

Just prior to hearing about Abner's setting up Ishbaal as king, the narrator has informed us of David's question of God: "Shall I go up to any of the cities of Judah?" Presumably, David is anticipating his kingship. *Yes,* says God. *Which city,* asks David? *Hebron,* says God. David does so, with all his family and men. "Then the people of Judah came [to Hebron] and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah" (II, 2:1–4). David has already curried favor with these people of Judah, returning spoils taken by the Amalekites, whom he chased down and defeated: the text is careful to detail David's thoroughness of largesse by citing the various locales of Judah receiving goods. The list of towns concludes with Hebron (I, 30:26–31). As so often suggested in this story, David and God seem to work in synchronized fashion: go to Hebron of Judah, says God; David has already prepared the way for his acceptance in all of Judah with prior generosity.

Such leadership capacity has already been demonstrated, and is indicated in a brief interlude between David's becoming king of Judah (II, 2:1–4) and Abner's appointing Ishbaal as king of "all Israel" (II, 2:8–10). David is shown paying special attention to the Saulide territory of Jabesh-gilead (II, 2:4b–7)—an episode rehearsed at the end of II Samuel (II, 21:10–12).

> David sent messengers to the people of Jabesh-gilead, and said to them, "May you be blessed by the Lord, because you showed this loyalty to Saul your lord, and buried him! Now may the Lord show steadfast love and faithfulness to you! And I too will reward you because you have done this thing. Therefore let your hands be strong, and be valiant; for Saul your lord is dead, and the house of Judah has anointed me king over them." (II, 2:5–7)

The narrator's inclusion of such detail points to politically circumspect praise for people under the sway of Abner and Ishbaal. May the Lord show you *hesed,* says David, who himself would like the same from these Saulides: *hesed,* steadfast love and faithfulness.

Looking forward to ruling over a united kingdom, David concludes his statement to this Israelite town with a deft touch: "the house of Judah has anointed me king over them" (II, 2:7), as in *the house of Judah has anointed me king over them—now how about you, from Israel?*

But first there will be confrontation between David's house of Judah and the Saulides. As mentioned, Saul's commander Abner makes Ishbaal king over Israel (the northern tribes). Immediately, warfare ensues (II, 2:8–17). The actual genesis of warfare begins strangely—a staged confrontation between twelve warriors of Abner and twelve of David's Joab. From each side of a pool, the two sides come together and engage in some sort of mock battle. Each grasps the other by the head—very strange business[5]—and thrusts a sword in the other's sides, yielding all twenty-four dead. Perhaps the twelve against twelve are to be taken as Israel, the twelve tribes, warring against each other; in fact, there will be a somewhat protracted conflict between the tribes from the house of Saul and David's Judah.[6]

Genuine battle ensues, "and the men of Israel were beaten by the servants of David" (II, 2:12–17). What follows are the circumstances of Abner's death. It is an unsavory picture that places the blame fully on Joab, who is exercising a strictly personal vendetta.

Abner and his men are retreating, but Asahel, a brother of Joab—a very fast runner—chases after Abner, who pleads with Asahel to turn back. Asahel refuses, foolishly; Abner reluctantly kills Asahel (II, 2:18–23). Or, rather, the foolhardy Asahel runs himself through Abner's spear, Abner having stopped to face the pursuer with his pointed spear. Asahel, brother of Joab, is dead. Abner is then pursued by Joab, with Abner talking sense: "Is the sword to keep devouring forever?" he asks. Joab agrees, and departs (II, 3:24–28). But the death of his brother Asahel at the hands of Abner rankles Joab, as we soon discover.

When David's commander Joab finds out that David has agreed to a unification treaty proposed by Abner—who has abandoned Ishbaal as king—Joab sends messengers to have Abner come back to Hebron. Abner apparently trusts Joab, and returns.

We have been told that Abner's efforts to forge a peace treaty, convincing his own people about the advisability of David as king, were genuine (II, 3:17–19). Joab, feigning diplomatic conversation, takes Abner aside and "there he stabbed him in the stomach. *So he died for shedding the blood of Asahel*" (3:26–27, emphasis mine).

Having established Joab's motive of revenge in the slaying of Abner, the narrator goes on to insist that David had no prior knowledge of Joab's intention or action (II, 3:26). Such a slaying would appear to be the last thing David wants, easily putting him in very bad light with the Saulides he is trying to win over—an aspect of the Abner sequence often overlooked.[7]

David's response to the murder of Abner, commander of Saul's troops, parallels in certain respects his reaction to the death news concerning Saul and Jonathan. "Do you not know that a prince and a great man [Abner] has fallen this day in Israel?" (II, 3:38). And in each case, the perpetrators are dealt with most harshly: the Amalekite messenger who professed to having slain Saul is himself slain; Joab, the treacherous agent of Abner's death, comes under a most serious curse, an oath that frames David's mourning:

FRAME 1, The Curse on Joab:

> Afterward, when David heard of it, he said, "I and my kingdom are forever guiltless before the Lord for the blood of Abner son of Ner. May the guilt fall on the head of Joab, and on all his father's house; and may the house of Joab never be without one who has a discharge, or who is leprous, or who holds a spindle, or who falls by the sword, or who lacks food!" So Joab and his brother Abishai murdered Abner because he had killed their brother Asahel in the battle at Gibeon. (II, 3:28–30)

CENTER, Mourning for Abner (II, 3:31–38)

FRAME 2, The Curse on Joab:

> "Today I am powerless, even though anointed king; these men, the sons of Zeruiah, are too violent for me. The Lord pay back the one who does wickedly in accordance with his wickedness!" (II, 3:39)

But for now, the king needs this commander, Joab, if he is to rule the people of God effectively. Facing death, however, David tells his son Solomon, Israel's next king, to take care of Joab ala the well-deserved curse: *the Lord pay back the one who does wickedly* (chapter 6).[8]

Within the frame of the curse on his own commander, David calls all the people to mourning.

> Then David said to Joab and to all the people who were with him, "Tear your clothes, and put on sackcloth, and mourn over Abner."
>
> And King David followed the bier. They buried Abner at Hebron. The king lifted up his voice and wept at the grave of Abner, and all the people wept.
>
> The king lamented for Abner, saying,

> "Should Abner die as a fool dies?
> Your hands were not bound,
> your feet were not fettered;
> as one falls before the wicked you have fallen."
>
> And all the people wept over him again. Then all the people came to persuade David to eat something while it was still day; but David swore, saying, "So may God do to me, and more, if I taste bread or anything else before the sun goes down!" (II, 3:31–35)

Surely this mourning is politically advantageous. Just as surely do the words ring true as genuine mourning. The heightened detail of treachery in the slaying suggests David's disgust.

For their part, as the narrator lets us know, the people recognize something exceptional in David.

> All the people took notice of it, and it pleased them; just as everything the king did pleased all the people. So all the people and all Israel understood that day that the king had no part in the killing of Abner son of Ner.
>
> And the king said to his servants, "Do you not know that a prince and a great man has fallen this day in Israel?" (II, 3:36–38)

The level of David's personal sorrow is impossible to gauge. In itself, this pleasing of all the people is not a mark against David, who needs the goodwill of the people in order to rule.[9] We find here the probable integrity of genuine grief and simultaneous political savvy. "David the leader," notes Robert Pinsky, "also compels Joab—whose family he has just cursed—to participate in a ritual that we can imagine is both politically calculated and heartfelt, on David's part."[10]

King David will lead a happy people, for example, in rejoicing over the ark's return (chapter 5). The reliable narrator would appear to be offering a definitive perspective on the matter: "so all the people and all Israel understood that day that the king had no part in the killing of Abner son of Ner." There is no indication here that the people are being hoodwinked by David's false and scheming show of grief. Of course we are free to read here a narrative gloss of David's actual (historical) wrongs—an issue we simply cannot confirm. That the retelling of David's story in I Chronicles 10–23:1 is a gloss of the Samuel account is clear: here are two accounts that we can compare. Looking at the Samuel version of the story in its present form, we find a delicate and complex handling of David's character, a character that emerges as entire, whole, a unity of consciousness and action (good and bad).

So all the people understood: the narrator chooses words carefully. There is no hint that the people merely *thought* (surmised) that David was blameless; rather, they *understood* (*yadah*). A worst-case scenario of feigning is possible: might not David be posing in his own mourning, thinking of his advantage in having Abner dead?[11] But consider what we have in the text that would make it difficult to read anything contrary into it or between the lines. Just prior to Abner's murder, we have seen the Saulide commander rallying his people behind David: "Just what the Lord has sworn to David," says Abner to Saul's son Ishbaal, "that will I accomplish for him." Abner then works with all the elders of Israel to win them over to David's cause; Abner makes sure David knows of the same (II, 3:12–19). The Saulide Abner could very well have helped David ease himself into the good graces of the northern tribes. David would not have been unaware of this advantage in having Abner alive. There is reason to believe, then, that David's consternation at the news of Abner's treacherous murder comports with genuine mourning.

We certainly find no gloating. Perhaps the private man, a grieving man, can be compatible with the public man, the political aspirant. And more than compatible: perhaps we are seeing that the private David, at his best, enhances the public David's good rule.

Public David 3, Death News: Ishbaal, Saul's Son (II, 4:5–12)

There have been difficult detours for David on the way to rule over a united kingdom—a goal supported wholeheartedly by this story's God.

Now there is news of the murder of Ishbaal, Saul's son and apparent successor. Will not David be implicated in Ishbaal's murder, since Abner has just died at the hands of David's commander Joab? Only Ishbaal stands in the way of David's becoming king of Saul's Israel: how could there not be suspicion?

Prior to a unification pact with David, Saul's commander Abner had appointed Saul's son Ishbaal king over the northern tribes of Israel. A subsequent falling-out with Ishbaal had turned Abner toward David, with solicitations for David as Israel's king made to the people of Israel (II, 3:6–11). Abner is murdered by Joab, and so Ishbaal must reign as king of Israel.

But "when Saul's son Ishbaal heard that Abner had died at Hebron, his courage failed"—and "all Israel was dismayed" (II, 4:1). Having established Ishbaal's weakness and Israel's dismay, the narrative would seem to be suggesting to its audience, along with reminders that David is God's choice as heir apparent to Saul's throne,[12] that David looks quite promising as a ruler over a combined Israel and Judah, a prospective united kingdom.

But there is another possible heir to Saul's throne,[13] Jonathan's son Mephibosheth, grandson of the recently deceased king. Notice of Mephibosheth's lameness interrupts the rapidly moving events quite strangely.

> When Saul's son Ishbaal heard that Abner had died at Hebron, his courage failed, and all Israel was dismayed. Saul's son had two captains of raiding bands; the name of the one was Baanah, and the name of the other Rechab. . . . Saul's son Jonathan had a son who was crippled in his feet. He was five years old when the news about Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel. His nurse picked him up and fled; and, in her haste to flee, it happened that he fell and became lame. His name was Mephibosheth. Now the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, Rechab and Baanah, set out, and about the heat of the day they came to the house of Ishbaal, while he was taking his noonday rest. (II, 4:1–5)

Rechab and Baanah, captains of Ishbaal's raiding band, murder Ishbaal.

Rechab and Baanah become the messengers bearing news of death to David. Like Joab, these killers are treacherous, approaching an unsuspecting victim who in this case is supine, on his couch. They murder Ishbaal, traveling south with the head.

"Here is the head of Ishbaal, son of Saul, your enemy, who sought your life," they announce to David; "the Lord has avenged my lord the king this day on Saul and on his offspring" (II, 4:8).

The alert listener anticipates what comes next, on the basis not only of the prior two instances of a similar pattern, but the general comportment of David toward any taking of life, unnecessarily, for political or personal gain. And most especially, killing one who is, or might be, the Lord's anointed.

> David answered Rechab and his brother Baanah, the sons of Rimmon the Beerothite, "As the Lord lives, who has redeemed my life out of every adversity, when the one who told me, 'See, Saul is dead,' thought he was bringing good news, I seized him and killed him at Ziklag—this was the reward I gave him for his news. How much more then, when wicked men have killed a righteous man on his bed in his own house! And now shall I not require his blood at your hand, and destroy you from the earth?" (II, 4:9–11)

How will David get the message out that he is not only innocent of this murder but also distraught because of it? "So David commanded the young men, and they killed them; they cut off their hands and feet, and hung their

bodies beside the pool at Hebron. But the head of Ishbaal they took and buried in the tomb of Abner at Hebron" (II, 4:12).

Here the pattern breaks, a twist: here is no public mourning, not even a private show of grief. In its place is a public warning, not only to all in Judah, but also, presumably, to all of the northern tribes of Israel: corpses, hanging hand-less and foot-less at the political center of David's world, the pool of Hebron.

Not taken back to Israel and hung: such could very well be part of what we have been witnessing as David's shrewd political instincts. If the bodies were returned to the northern tribes, they could very well suspect that, in fact, David's men had ventured forth to the north in the first place—so why not hang them there? No, these traitors came south, to David, and so here they hang, The possibility that David sent killers to dispose of Mephibosheth, and then kidnap or kill Rechab and Baanah on the spot and bring the two back down to hang hand-less and foot-less in Hebron, strains credulity. David has acted quickly, reasonably, politically—and on principle: those who would lay a hand on one possibly in line to be the Lord's anointed will suffer in kind. The news, presumably, would be received favorably in the north by Israel, whom David is seeking to woo.

But what of the narrative interruption of Mephibosheth, back in the early part of this sequence? With typical economy, the narrative forces its audience to determine the logic here, that the way for David's becoming king is being cleared, even down to the possible heir to the throne, Mephibosheth. His being only a grandson, and lame, would seem to recommend against the possibility. We recall, as well, that at the time of Jonathan's yielding to David his own position as the throne's heir, there had been a covenant between David and Jonathan, Jonathan insisting on safety for his offspring when David becomes king.[14] In the narrative ahead, Mephibosheth son of Jonathan will reappear, repeatedly, as the recipient of David's quite circumspect largesse.

Ever so carefully David the political aspirant pushes ahead shrewdly, while avoiding political pitfalls. Three times in succession, we have seen it in David's response to news of deaths of politically connected characters: Saul and Jonathan, Abner, and Ishbaal. Each of these dead might be seen to have thwarted David's political ambition. Saul has been hunting David down, yes, but Abner might have made good on the treaty with David, and Ishbaal might have welcomed, in his frightened state, the rule of David. Let us say that in each of the three instances, people were slain (Saul through his own agency) who at one point opposed or would have been expected to oppose David politically. Politically expedient, the mourning: quite true. But personally distressing for

David as well, if narrative details are considered closely: Abner's having gone to Israel, for example, and urging David as king, and then the treaty Abner initiates, which David agrees on. With Ishbaal, we have heard of Israel's dismay at the thought of his rule, Ishbaal's own fright, and David's response to death news, a stinging accusation of cowardly treachery.

Finally, the narrator affords this kind of summary, as we saw: "David became greater and greater, for the *Lord, the God of hosts,* was with him" (II, 5:10).

What this text insists on, with great tact, is the capacity of David to rule, something in which God appears heavily invested. David's response to news of the deaths of political or would-be political opponents illustrates this capacity especially well.

We move next to David's response to news of the deaths not of political opponents but of his own sons. As doting father, David responds in a distinctly poor way, as we have seen. How the father responds to news of sons' deaths brings into focus the king-father's potential for clarity and greatness, but mostly draws attention to a great befuddlement of mind and spirit appropriate to the father's failings.

Private David 1, Death News: David's Infant Son (II, 12:15–24)

The king hears news of three sons' deaths—losses due in part, as in Eli's case, to a father's parochial catering to sons, and/or to greedy appetite (Eli's lust for food, David's lust for a woman).

God has decreed that the infant who is born of David's adulterous liaison with Bathsheba will die. In this fourth instance of David's receiving death news, we find two twists in the pattern. As always, such formal differences within a pattern of repetition are important in disclosing meaning.

The infant lies ill for six days, and on the seventh day dies, as God has said would happen. During that time, David takes on all the appearances of mourning, including fasting and lying on the ground—against which his servants advise. The child dies. We expect messengers to bring David the news. They do not. We expect mourning. There is none. The would-be messengers are surprised, and so, presumably, is the story's audience.

> On the seventh day the child died. And the servants of David were afraid to tell him that the child was dead; for they said, "While the child was still alive, we spoke to him, and he did not listen to us; how then can we tell him the child is dead? He may do himself some harm."

> But when David saw that his servants were whispering together, he perceived that the child was dead; and David said to his servants, "Is the child dead?"
>
> They said, "He is dead."
>
> Then David rose from the ground, washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes. He went into the house of the Lord, and worshiped; he then went to his own house; and when he asked, they set food before him and he ate. (II, 12:18–20)

Had David been preparing himself for the dire consequences of what God said his wrongdoing would bring?

The father's strange behavior puzzles the servants greatly. The king has acted in completely reverse fashion from the expected.

> "What is this thing that you have done?" they ask him. "You fasted and wept for the child while it was alive; but when the child died, you rose and ate food."
>
> He said, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept; for I said, 'Who knows? The Lord may be gracious to me, and the child may live.' But now he is dead; why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." (II, 12:21–23)

On the face of it, as Pinsky observes, "David's answer indicates an unfathomable command of himself, recognizing both the need for magic or piety and the boundaries of that need. He recognizes the nature of the world, including his own mortality."[15] David anticipates the death and takes note of it, with the would-be messengers scared off; David has practiced a mourning-like beseeching of God—magic? piety?—to spare his son. The infant dies, and David moves on immediately, realistically—wordly wise, as Pinsky puts it, but with an apparent acceptance of God's appropriate punishment for adultery and murder.

Future responses to death news about sons Amnon and Absalom will evidence no such "command of himself," while prior reactions to death news regarding Saul and Jonathan, Abner, and Ishbaal, revealed a similar composure and a capacity to react with great political acumen.

> Then David consoled his wife Bathsheba, and went to her, and lay with her; and she bore a son, and he named him Solomon. The Lord loved him, and sent a message by the prophet Nathan; so he named him Jedidiah [beloved of the Lord], because of the Lord. (II, 12:24–25)

David immediately is capable of resuming life in both the political and familial realms. In quick narrative order he is blessed by the birth of a son, then engages in military exploits (II, 12: 22–31). The clipped pace of the narrative here suggests a quick turn-around by the terribly faulty David.

We have two interpretive options of David's response to the infant's death. James Ackerman asks, "Is the story depicting a cool, calculating relationship to God? Or does it show David's resilient faith that accepts the child's death as divine judgment after his pleas for divine mercy have had no effect?"[16] The answer emerges, I think, from the unfolding pattern ahead, and from consideration of the particular twists in this present instance of the pattern: messengers staying mum for fear of their king's state of mind juxtaposed with David's actual state of mind when learning, on his own, of the infant's death. Here is a father who can accept consequences of wrongdoing and get on with the business of ruling God's people. As a foil to this response are the quite pathetic responses to death-news of two other sons, Amnon and Absalom.

Private David 2, Death News: David's Son Amnon (II, 13:21–39)

The infant son of David and Bathsheba dies, as God said would be the case. We have seen in the prior chapter that the consequences of adultery and murder linger long, and disastrously. In a macabre mime of his father's physical indulgence, son Amnon rapes his half-sister. David gets very angry. But "he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him" (II, 13:21). Two years go by, and Absalom kills brother Amnon at a feast.

The delivery of death news is handled in a narratively strange manner, as is the father's subsequent mourning for Amnon's death.

First, David hears a report that all of his sons, including Amnon, have been killed by Absalom. David "tore his garments, and lay on the ground and all his servants [did the same]" (II, 13:30–31) But then David is told that not all the sons have died: "Amnon alone is dead," he hears (II, 13:32).

What follows is not, as we might expect, a report of David's mourning Amnon's death. Rather, we hear the narrator's report that "Absalom fled" (II, 13: 33–34), a narrative peculiarity—with some sort of meaning?

Next, we hear that the returning sons of the king sons "raised their voices and wept; and the king and all his servants also wept very bitterly" (II, 13:36).

That's all, followed immediately by a second notice, "Absalom fled" (II, 13:37).

So mention of Absalom's flight frames the very brief notice of the king's mourning. Is the narrator suggesting the confused state of David's emotions, that his feelings regarding the absent two sons are difficult to pin down? The seeming narrative oddity might suggest an ambiguity about whether David is mourning Amnon's death or Absalom's flight.

The text moves immediately to mention of David's mourning "for his son day after day" (II, 13:37). Here, the narrator presents us with clear ambiguity: "his son" could be the permanently lost Amnon or the missing Absalom.

Father David had done nothing about son Amnon's incestuous rape "because he [David] loved him, for he was his first born" (II, 13:21). Nowhere, as some would have it, does the text indicate David's covert pleasure at hearing the news of Amnon's death,[17] though David's response at the death news is, indeed, ambiguous. Any sorrow regarding Amnon's death appears compromised by a father's concern for a living but self-exiled son.

The text moves on with information that Absalom stays away three years and that, finally, "the heart of the king went out, yearning for Absalom; for he was now consoled over the death of Amnon"[18] (II, 13:37–39).

Meanwhile, there is no narrative notice of David's ruling Israel during these three years of Absalom's absence. Is David being incriminated as a distracted ruler? That something is terribly amiss here is indicated by the episode's initial confusion of message. David hears death-news regarding all his sons, and goes into mourning. But then he hears, no, only Absalom is dead. He stops his mourning. Not until the sons actually show up does David go into mourning again—but for whom? Is it for Amnon's death or Absalom's absence? It's all a muddle.

Absalom, in any event, now takes center stage. David remains in the narrative shadows, passive toward his son and persuaded wrongly regarding that son by a clever woman. His response to hearing the death news regarding Absalom brings into focus just how obsessed the private David is, as father, and how ineffectual and even harmful the public David can be, his private grief spilling over to the detriment of the community.

Private David 3, Death News: David's Son Absalom (II, 18:24–19:8)

Immediately following the narrative notice of Absalom's fleeing—notice that has framed the confusing mourning of David—the narrative tells us that "the

heart of the king went out, yearning for Absalom." This is followed by Joab's perception that "the king's mind was on Absalom" (13:39–40).

As we saw in chapter 6, David's yearning for his son Absalom, could be a longing either for reconciliation or for retribution. The text is unclear, but in either case, David has done nothing for the three years, though Absalom's location, in Geshur, is very reachable. Finally, at Absalom's insistence and with the conniving of Joab, David allows his son back into Jerusalem. But he fails to confront or even meet with the son for another two years (II, 13:38 and 14:1; 14:28). In the fifth year after Absalom's flight, the returned son connives to get an audience with his father the king—who offers, wordlessly, a kiss. Then, again, nothing.

Absalom foments revolt and serious civil strife. But King David, through his own scheming and the help of God and close friends, prevails. Absalom is slain by the king's forces. David's response to news of Absalom's death expresses a most severe tilting of the narrative tension between father and king.

Two different messengers come with the news. The first delivers news of victory, but an uncertain answer to David's question about the status of Absalom. And then, a second messenger:

> Then the Cushite came; and the Cushite said, "Good tidings for my lord the king! For the Lord has vindicated you this day, delivering you from the power of all who rose up against you."
>
> The king said to the Cushite, "Is it well with the young man Absalom?"
>
> The Cushite answered, "May the enemies of my lord the king, and all who rise up to do you harm, be like that young man."
>
> The king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!"
>
> It was told Joab, "The king is weeping and mourning for Absalom."
>
> So the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the troops; for the troops heard that day, "The king is grieving for his son." The troops stole into the city that day as soldiers steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle.
>
> The king covered his face, and the king cried with a loud voice, "O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (II, 18:32—19:4)

Regarding this scene, readers often express sympathy for David: here is a real father, here is real grief.[19] But such a response is guarded against by the

narrator. David has vacated the gate and is rendered moot and even harmful in his role as King, sobbing aloud and dispiriting his troops.

Here is a personal sorrow that includes nothing of public ritual and everything of a private sorrow that is overweening, threatening the public good. "Today," says Joab to David, "you have covered with shame the faces of all your officers who have saved your life today" (II, 19:5). *So the victory that day was turned into mourning for all the troops,* but not a mourning-with, as in a public rite of grieving. No, they mourn for their own shame. The king has given way entirely to the father, and has turned his rule upside down.

Response to news of Absalom's death has exposed the worst of David's heart—an ironic comment on a love for sons that is not at all like God's love for a son, which is never without the caring rod of discipline (II, 7:14).

Joab completes his harangue, and "then the king got up and took his seat at the gate" (II, 19:8). With this harsh reprimand from Joab, David the father instantly returns to being David the king, assuming royal duties. David has repented most sincerely, as can be surmised from his action in turning away from private chamber and personal sorrow and going to the town gate—a sign of revitalized responsibilities, not the avoidance that some find.[20]

At his indulgent worst as a father, David rises to exhibit his royal best. Never has it been so bad for David the private man, the father. "The king was deeply moved" (II, 18:33) is far too mild a translation, and disguises a clue that links David's personal agitation to Eli's hour of travail. Waiting for news of the ark, which has been taken by his two sons into battle, Eli's heart "trembles fearfully" [*hared*]; when King David hears news of Absalom's death, his heart experiences a "fearful trembling" (*ga'ash;* I, 4:13; II, 18:33).[21]

In this pattern of messenger, death news, and response, there is the special linkage between the Eli and the David-Absalom instances not only with the shared *trembling with a great shuddering* but, more significantly, with mention of the town gate. Both Eli and David wait for dire news at the town gate, where judges and kings sit to adjudicate the problems of their people. When the messenger comes to Eli with news of his sons' death and the ark's loss, the old priest topples off the gate for good, never to return. David had left his position "between the two gates" and he "went up the chamber over the gate, and wept" (II, 18:24, 33)—but then chooses, with the help of Joab's intervention, to relocate himself at the gate (II, 19:8). The parallel between Eli and David as failed fathers accentuates David's ability to turn around in regard not only to his weeping for Absalom but also in his resumption of kingly duties at the gate.[22] The story's audience can hardly fault Eli for not resuming duties at the gate that marks the spot of his death, but the text makes clear the calumny that has lead to Eli's response, irrevocable, on hearing news of the ark's loss and his son's death.

As David's story plays out, the narrator seems to be suggesting that the gravest problem with David, worse in nature and consequence than his adultery with Bathsheba and the covering-up murder of Uriah, is the imbalance between parental obsession and kingly responsibility. This tension mirrors Eli's honoring of the personal and parochial more than God and the rule of God's people. The narrative stage is set for the ultimate turn-around, a royal willingness on David's part to risk a son's displeasure by doing the kingly thing in choosing another heir, one who the audience surmises is God's choice and David's goodly friends' choice. The important point, as always, is communal well-being and what sort of leadership such a state of *shalom* requires.

Private-Public David: Ominous News, Son Adonijah, and Reversal (I Kings: 1:5–31)

We saw in chapter 6 that the narrative regarding failed fathers has been building toward the final test case of David's son Adonijah. Put on alert by the fate of father Eli and his two undisciplined sons, the audience has witnessed in the saga of David the father a crescendoing of parochial fawning and royal weakening.

Now, at the end of his story, we find David in his dying days receiving word from two messengers about yet another son whose aberrance is, in part, to be laid at the feet of a father's indulgence. At stake, at least for the immediate future, is the well-being of the nation Israel. But the news, though very bad, is not about a son's death, but about that kind of behavior that led to the death of Absalom. In regards to the pattern of responding to death news, this concluding instance can be viewed as an epilogue of sorts.

The greatly enfeebled and dying king lies in bed, as we have seen, unaware of what others within the story and those hearing the story already know, that Adonijah is setting himself up as king. At this point, the narrator inserts a crucial observation: "His father had never at any time displeased him by asking, 'Why have you done thus and so?' " (I Kings 1:6) Can there be recovery, a turning-around at this eleventh hour of the king's life, of the father's life? Will he do something, finally, that marks him as a truly good father? He receives bad but preventative news about yet another spoiled son. Prophet Nathan and wife Bathsheba play the role of messengers.

Nathan urges Bathsheba to approach David with the news of Adonijah's presumption, and a reminder that David had promised her that their son Solomon would be heir to the throne. The audience has never heard of this

promise from David. But a long narrative while ago, we have heard this promise from God, through the prophet Nathan:

> "When your days are fulfilled I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever." (II, 7:12–16)

As II Samuel 12:24 makes clear, this heir loved by God is Solomon. Even if Nathan is conspiring, and falsifying the record, he is doing so with the implicit backing of God, as the above words indicate. In any event, Bathsheba does as she is asked, and is followed on cue by the second messenger, Nathan.

David responds well to the news, as we have seen. The breakthrough of David as father-king is remarkable, given what the narrative highlights in a pattern of failed fathers that began with Eli as a template. David's right action as a father finally coincides with his right action as a king, just as in the very first instance of David's noting the infant's death (messengers tongue-tied), the king's response is immediate acceptance of consequences of his wrongdoing, and his prompt return to leading God's people. "Bathsheba and Nathan stake everything on the appeal to David's authority," notes Robert Pinsky. "On some level, they are inviting him to be David."[23]

Given the preceding case of Absalom, the king's instant response here to the news of a rebellious son presumably saves that son's life, while saving the kingdom from a presumptuous usurper. That Adonijah is later slain, after his father's death, for making a request smacking of the traitorous, reaffirms the correctness of the king's acquiescence to the messengers' word regarding Adonijah and Solomon.[24]

Not death news from the two messengers, then, but life-bringing news. From his doldrums as a pathetic father and ineffectual ruler, King David is brought back to life. He knows what he is doing, is clear, and puts into motion that which is best for Israel, his reason for being chosen by God over Saul. "Awe is due," Pinsky sees, "to how the old king demonstrates that he has a plan; and can name those who will execute it; and chooses to specify how they will carry it out for him."[25] From a seriously decrepit state David rises, taking charge both as king and as father.[26]

Conclusion

The pattern of responses to messengers bearing bad news in the six instances of death, plus the epilogue's good news, unfolds in such a way as to reveal the kingdom-building and kingdom-threatening capacities of David.

In his rise to rule over the united kingdom, David is shown responding to death news involving political opponents or would-be opponents splendidly: shrewdly, and with rhetoric of God-devotedness. In these three instances—Saul and Jonathan; Abner; Ishbaal—David has shown possibly genuine emotion while moving ahead politically. God has anointed him as king: the story suggests that it's greatly up to David to figure out how to get there.

What threatens David's rule as king is the indulgence of David the private man: lustful lounger, on unwarranted leave from being king and leader of the troops. Worst of all, within the implicit moral vision of this story, is his leave-taking as king in favor of familial indulgences.

"I took you from the pasture," God says to David through Nathan, "from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel" (II, 7:8). David's motives, hard as they are to determine, reveal themselves through actions that indicate a synergy of private goals and desire for public good that sometimes accords with what is reported as God's desire.

As father, David the king does exceptionally well in the first and fourth response to news regarding sons: learning of his infant son's death, David ceases his mourning and resumes kingly responsibilities almost immediately. And, receiving news of civil strife caused by his errant son Adonijah, the father-king acts decisively against the son who had never heard from his father a word of displeasure. Between this frame of greatness—response to the infant son's death, and response to news of Adonijah's evil intentions—are the two low points of David the king and David the father, a seemingly distracted response to dire news concerning son Amnon and then a grossly inappropriate response to the news of Absalom's death. News of Amnon's death appears possibly conflated in the distraught father's mind with Absalom's flight, each a distraction from the father's role as king.

Who is David? He is a complex blend of king who responds well to news of his opponents' or would-be opponents' deaths, while doing well and not so well with similar news concerning his own sons. The mystery of David is giving way to greater clarity, but not without further questions. For example: how does his wrongdoing, so monstrous, not warrant a change of the divine mind, as for Eli and for Saul? We have begun to answer that question,

Pattern 9: David, Messengers, and News of Death

	News of Death	Response to Messenger/ Perpetrator	Response to the Death	Outcome
PUBLIC DAVID: #1, *Saul & Jonathan (II, 1:27)*	Messenger claims to have killed Saul, at the king's request.	"Were you not afraid to lift your hand to destroy the LORD'S anointed?" David has the messenger slain.	David initiates ritual of mourning, followed by his eulogy for the fallen father and son.	Political gain; deeply-felt emotion? (lament for Jonathan in particular).
#2, *Abner, Saul's Commander (II, 3:28–39)*	David hears a report of Abner's unseemly death.	David claims himself "guilt-less before the LORD for the blood of Abner;" puts a curse on Joab & his house.	David leads public mourning; "lamented for Abner"; people weep again, urge David to eat.	All understand that the king had no part in the killing of Abner.
#3, *Ishbaal, heir; Saul's Grandson (II, 4:5–12)*	Two brothers bear death-news, and the head of Ishbaal, son of Saul.	David has the messengers/ brothers slain for killing a righteous man.	Hand-less and feet-less bodies hang at the pool of Hebron: as public notice of David's innocence?	Tribes of Israel solicit David as their king; they anoint David king of all Israel.
PRIVATE DAVID: #1, *Infant Son (II, 12:15–24)*	David himself anticipates the death; asks would-be messengers. *Is my son dead*?	Anticipating the death, David has lain on the ground before God, fasting and weeping.	"David rose from the ground, washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes. . . ." Worships.	David consoles Bathsheba, who conceives. David resumes kingly duties, immediately.
#2, *Son Amnon (II, 13:21–39)*	David hears that all sons have been killed by Absalom; then, that only Amnon is dead.	David simply gets word: does the message overwhelm any need for citing messenger?	At report that all sons have died, David "tore his garments, and lay on the ground (13:31); corrected message, Amnon only is dead: David mourns "for his son [Amnon or Absalom?] day after day."	Absalom stays away 3 years; "the heart of the king went out, yearning for Absalom; for he was now consoled over the death of Amnon."

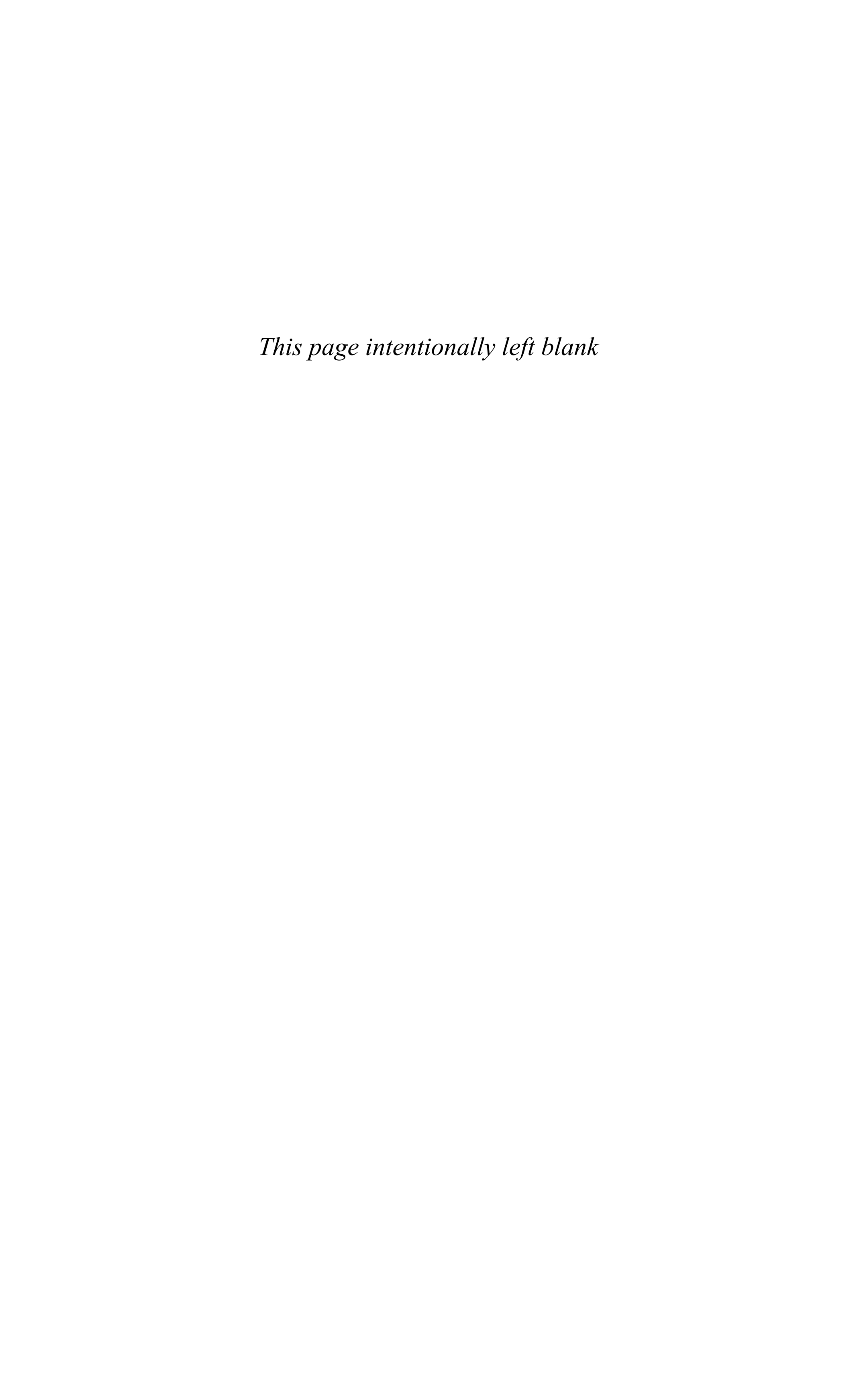
(continued)

Pattern 9: David, Messengers, and News of Death (*continued*)

	News of Death	Response to Messenger/ Perpetrator	Response to the Death	Outcome
#3, *Son Absalom* *(II, 18:24–19:8)*	2nd messenger is direct: "May the enemies of my lord the king . . . be like that young man [dead]."	No direct response to second messenger; shaken by news, David immediately goes into mourning.	"O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" . . . "O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!' ".	The people are humiliated and dispirited by David's wailing. Joab confronts David, who ceases his weeping and returns to the town gate.
PUBLIC-PRIVATE DAVID *Son Adonijah* *(I Kings: 1:5–31)*	Two messengers come, successively, with news of civil unrest: David's spoiled son Adonijah is following in Absalom's steps . . .	Listens respectfully: Nathan is a reliable prophet; Bathsheba is the mother of a son loved by God, we have been told.	David's saying *yes* to Solomon is, in effect, saying *no*—for the first time—to a spoiled son. Two spoiled sons have died: about Amnon David will never hear of an untimely death.	Solomon enjoys, for a while, great success as Israel's king.

but it is in the chiastic conclusion to II Samuel that the answer becomes definitive.

There are, in effect, two endings to David's story, the second involving sons Adonijah and Solomon, in I Kings 1–2, which I have examined in this and earlier chapters. The first ending occurs in an elaborately crafted chiasm that concludes II Samuel: a four-chapter series of three reversed parallels of theme that brilliantly encapsulate the three major dynamics of the David story. I turn to this first ending in my concluding two chapters.



8

Chiastic Conclusion: Warriors, Leadership, and Poetic Reflection

Pattern 10 (A)

The final four chapters of II Samuel are arranged with no regard for proper chronology but with great care as a conclusion to the whole story of David, Saul, and God. Here we find a chiastic pattern of repetition (ring composition) that gathers together and concludes major dramatic concerns: (Ring 1) contrast between Saul and David, including David's claim of blamelessness and Saul's guilt; (Ring 2) David's leadership capacity, implicitly contrasted with Saul's; and (Ring 3) the happy synergy of David's God-devotion and political acumen. This present chapter deals with the second and last pair of themes (highlighted below). The paralleled themes that begin and end this chiasm, the chiastic frame (Ring 1 and 1), are explored in the following chapter (Part B).*

Ring 1: Saul Sins, Blame? Three Years Plague, Resolution (II, 21:1–14)
Ring 2: David's Warriors, Leadership (II, 21:15–22)
Ring 3: David's Poem: Blamelessness and God (II, 22:1–51)
Ring 3*: David's Poem: Ideal Ruler and God (II, 23:1–7)
Ring 2*: David's Warriors, Leadership (II, 23:8–39)
Ring 1: David Sins: Blame? Three Days Plague, Resolution (II, 24:1–25)*

Often noticed but until recently relegated to narrative irrelevance, the four-chapter conclusion to the Book of Samuel (I and II) clarifies three crucial themes by way of repeating each, in reverse order—a chiasm.[1] Because of their clarifying function, these final four chapters

are more formal than the story they bring into focus. There is less nuance and dialogue than we have seen. The chiasm as a rhetorical device, complete with its difference in tone, serves the appropriate narrative goal brilliantly by providing a conclusion that truly concludes.[2]

Themes 2 and 2*: David's Warriors and Leadership (II, 21:15–22; II, 23:8–39)

The second theme (2 and 2*) presents warrior lists that reflect on the qualities of David's leadership; the echoing theme not only echoes the first instance but elaborates on the warrior lists in a rhetorically powerful manner. In the latter (2*) we discover what David elicits from his warriors: fierce loyalty, wise advice, and a love that risks, gratuitously. To command such response from followers is no small matter, since part of what the audience already knows is that God wants just such a king: "Thus says the Lord of hosts," Nathan tells David about God's intentions: "I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel' " (II, 7:8). Such response from the led "sheep," the troops and people, contrasts sharply with memorable scenes of Saul's troops deserting, or the people regaling him as their leader, appropriately. The narrator's selection and highlighting of detail confirm for the alert audience a view of David that has been emerging in this story of a remarkable though dangerously faulty leader.

Theme 2: David's Warriors and Leadership (II, 21:15–22)

In praising David's strength, the narrator chooses to begin the first warrior list by showing David growing weary in battle. The point is quickly established that David's troops are sensible and David strong enough in his self-assessment to allow the troops their wise advice.

> The Philistines went to war again with Israel, and David went down together with his servants. They fought against the Philistines, and David grew weary. Ishbi-benob, one of the descendants of the giants, whose spear weighed three hundred shekels of bronze, and who was fitted out with new weapons, said he would kill David. But Abishai son of Zeruiah came to his aid, and attacked the Philistine and killed him.
>
> Then David's men swore to him, "You shall not go out with us to battle any longer, so that you do not quench the lamp of Israel." (II, 21:15–17)

Abishai is the hero here. The opposing giant, "fitted out with new weapons" including a spear of prodigious weight, "said he would kill David. But Abishai . . . came to his aid, and attacked the Philistine and killed him." Has David been able to teach Abishai, and others, his own giant-slaying ways?

But why is Abishai singled out? That he can take on giants for his king is something, but there is more. We hear an echo of the first and dramatic mention of this heroic if hotheaded warrior, back when David had his second chance to kill his murderous enemy King Saul (chapter 4). The same giant-slayer Abishai has been nurtured in the politics of loyalty and respect for God's anointed:

> So David and Abishai went to the army by night; there Saul lay sleeping within the encampment, with his spear stuck in the ground at his head; and Abner and the army lay around him.
>
> Abishai said to David, "God has given your enemy into your hand today; now therefore let me pin him to the ground with one stroke of the spear; I will not strike him twice."
>
> But David said to Abishai, "Do not destroy him; for who can raise his hand against the Lord's anointed, and be guiltless?"
>
> David said, "As the Lord lives, the Lord will strike him down; or his day will come to die; or he will go down into battle and perish. The Lord forbid that I should raise my hand against the Lord's anointed; but now take the spear that is at his head, and the water jar, and let us go." (I, 26:7–11)

Warriors become great if led by greatness. David is revealed as an ideal king who can teach by word and example. Working toward becoming king, politically shrewd, David makes sure that Abishai learns respect for "the Lord's anointed" under whatever circumstances. The anecdotal prominence of Abishai in the first listing of warriors is rhetorically effective in making the narrator's point about David's capacity to elicit the best from the best.

The first sequence of this chiastic pair goes on to show David's warriors taking care of things, gloriously; they are David's champions, completely devoted (I, 21:18–22).

Theme 2: David's Warriors and Leadership (Repeated) (II, 23:8–39)*

The echoing list of warriors elaborates on the kind of leader David is, and includes one of the most moving anecdotes of the entire story of David.

A quite magnanimous gesture of an anonymous "three of the thirty chiefs," on behalf of David, is prepared for, rhetorically, by the decidedly more

warrior-like exploits of "the Three" who are so named. The heroics of "the Three," with which the sequence begins, are very impressive indeed:

> Josheb-basshebeth . . . was chief of the Three; he wielded his spear against eight hundred whom he killed at one time. Next to him among the three warriors was Eleazar. . . . He struck down the Philistines until his arm grew weary, though his hand clung to the sword. The Lord brought about a great victory that day. Then the people came back to him—but only to strip the dead. Next to him was Shammah. . . . [H]e took his stand in the middle of the plot, defended it, and killed the Philistines; and the Lord brought about a great victory. (II, 23:8–13)

Immediately the text describes another "three"—unnamed and without the claim to battlefield fame of "the Three."

"Towards the beginning of harvest three of the thirty chiefs went down to join David at the cave of Adullam" (II, 23:13). In the middle of battlefield maneuvering, these three overhear a sigh from King David: "O that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem" (I, 23:15).

> Then the three warriors broke through the camp of the Philistines, drew water from the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate, and brought it to David.
>
> But he would not drink of it; he poured it out to the Lord, for he said, "The Lord forbid that I should do this. Can I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?"
>
> Therefore he would not drink it. The three warriors did these things. (II, 23:16–17)

This extraordinary human response to David is rewarded by the king, who honors his three champions for their steadfast loyalty and love by pouring out the water as a sacrifice to God.

Which of the heroics is more impressive, those of "the Three" or those of "the three"? The narrative point, with both groups of three warriors, is the quality of David's leadership to command such various sorts of heroics. What remains in the mind of the audience, of course, is the demonstrable, gratuitous, and moving action of the three, who have sacrificed their lives for . . . what? A mere whisper of wistful longing is enough to generate an unthinkable action on behalf of the beloved David.

While Saul's warriors flee for fear early and late in the king's career,[3] David's warriors slip away for love, risking life to satisfy something less than even a whim of their leader, their king.

Far from an isolated incident, the focus on "the three" in this paralleled theme of warrior lists serves as an epiphany of the kind of leader David is, by measure of the loyalty shown him. That the three warriors are unnamed allows them to serve, as Herbert Klement notes, as representative of all David's warriors.[4]

How truthfully does the response from the three, expressing the utmost of respect and love, comport with the whole story?

After he had been secretly anointed as king, but long before ascending the throne, we hear that David was both loved and honored. From the start, the people of Israel "loved [David]; for it was he who marched out and came in leading them" (I, 18:13–16).[5] Such devotion turns out to be deserved: David unites Judah and Israel, extending their boundaries and bringing back the ark of the covenant. As king, he has provided Israel with security through exceptional military exploits, deft rule, and unfailing loyalty to God.

David's early success on behalf of the people, appreciated by all, had gnawed at King Saul. Israel's first king turned against his most prized champion, investing emotional and military resources to eliminate him. This is a perverse picture of leadership, precisely the reverse of God's intentions for a king. Saul's interests as king, from the very start, were more about his position as king than the well-being of God's people. Often, Saul is portrayed as commanding little or no respect—an implicit foil to the strength and direction of David's leadership.[6] David's strength is measured, in part, against the backdrop of Saul's poor and pervasive failure as leader, even from the time David first enters the narrative stage.

Not that all has gone smoothly, of course, in this support for David. Absalom, in large part because of David's failure as a father, has stirred up enough discontent to mount a serious threat to the king's rule.[7] Even as he flees, however, David is surrounded by faithful troops and hangers-on (II, 15:15–30). "Your servants are ready to do whatever our lord the king decides," we hear (II, 15:15). Immediately after Absalom's murder and the subsequent reunification of Judah and Israel, David is again held in high regard (II, 19:40–43).

But then more civil unrest breaks out. "A scoundrel named Sheba" creates another brief national crisis: "We have no portion in David," he says to the people, who at that point "withdrew from David and followed Sheba" (II, 20:1–2). "Scoundrel," we recall, indicates the worst of wrongdoers: the rapist murderers in the Judges episode; the two evil sons of Eli; Tamar's rapist half-brother ("scoundrel" is what Tamar has said to Amnon, hoping to prevent his actions). Sheba is just such. David's newly appointed general, Amasa, delays in starting after Sheba. Two of David's best warriors, the brothers Joab and

Abishai, go after Sheba, treacherously murdering Amasa along the way.[8] With the help of a wise woman, another civil war is averted by the woman's promise of Sheba's head to Joab. The general agrees, the woman delivers, civil strife is avoided, and Joab returns to King David. At this point, the people are united with all the important political and religious players in place.

The record of David's greatness, though an uneven record, reveals a troop foundation that is rock solid. A retrospective of this record and the plumbing of David's depths—the foundational issues of character—are what inform the outlook of the chiastic conclusion.

A great leader has warriors who are well trained, ready, and loyal. In David's case, the troops revere their leader as "the lamp of Israel" (II, 21:17). We hear an echo of "the lamp of God" in the last chaotic days under the judges, under Eli the priest: "the word of the Lord was rare" but "the lamp of God had not yet gone out" (I, 3:1–3). God is a lamp for Israel, represented among the people in the person of David, "lamp of Israel." The word *lamp* is repeated again, significantly, in David's major poem at the heart of the chiasm, as we will see.

That the paralleled themes conclude and emphasize what we have already seen is evident from three further examples from the preceding narrative. These scenes are minor in terms of plot, but major way in terms of character portrayal—much like the seemingly out-of-context mention of Saul's building a monument to himself (I, 15:12). Why David is considered "the lamp of Israel" can be better understood in the light of these three separate sequences. Each points to qualities of a great leader.

1. He can deal equitably and rigorously on behalf of *all* those led.
2. He can elicit from followers and reciprocate not just loyalty but kindness.
3. He can listen to the genuine wisdom of loyal pleas from those led.

1. DEALING EQUITABLY AND RIGOROUSLY ON BEHALF OF ALL THOSE LED. In his final stage of fleeing from the jealously deranged Saul, David has gone into Philistine territory. He has duped the Philistine king, Achish, who believes that David's raids against Philistine towns are against Israel. David and his men return from one of these raids to his temporary home town of Ziklag, only to find themselves victims of a raid—from the Amalekites.[9] Wives and entire families have been kidnapped, and the town burned down.

> Then David and the people who were with him raised their voices and wept, until they had no more strength to weep. . . . David was in great danger; for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the

> people were bitter in spirit for their sons and daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God. (I, 30:4–6)

After consulting God and getting a divine go-ahead, "David set out, he and the six hundred men who were with him. They came to the Wadi Besor, where . . . two hundred stayed behind, too exhausted to cross the Wadi Besor" (I, 30:9–10).

David finds his prey, overcomes them, and rescues his people. He and his army are returning home, but all is not well with the troops.

> David came to the two hundred men who had been too exhausted to follow David. . . . Then all the corrupt and worthless fellows among the men who had gone with David said, "Because they did not go with us, we will not give them any of the spoil that we have recovered, except that each man may take his wife and children, and leave."
>
> But David said, "You shall not do so, my brothers, with what the Lord has given us; he has preserved us and handed over to us the raiding party that attacked us. Who would listen to you in this matter? For the share of the one who goes down into the battle shall be the same as the share of the one who stays by the baggage; they shall share alike." (I, 30:21–24)

David's finesse as a leader is based in part on his wide view of justice. The narrator's word, as we have seen, confirms the overall goodness of David's rule: "So David reigned over all Israel; and David administered justice and equity to all his people" (II, 8:15). And the good of this rule endures, even up through the writer's own time: "From that day forward he made it [sharing spoils] a statute and an ordinance for Israel; it continues to the present day" (I, 30:25).

At this point of hiding out under enemy cover, David is not yet king, though he has been privately anointed as such by Samuel. David presumably anticipates becoming king, however. "When David arrived back at Ziklag, he sent part of the spoil to his friends, the elders of Judah, saying, 'Here is a present for you from the spoil of the enemies of the Lord'" (I, 30:26). These will be the first elders to accept David as king, one who is both shrewd and genuinely considerate.

Militarily, David is wise, fair, and tough-minded in dealing with his troops; politically, the king-to-be is astute, anticipating well the effects of largesse. While it is possible to interpret the political advantage as canceling out the generosity, the narrative here and elsewhere seems to indicate, as we have observed, a frequent synergy for David of political acumen and moral behavior, undergirded by what the story insists on as David's trust in God.[10]

Consider, once again, the Ziklag episode, which is punctuated by references to David's precarious state between a rock and a hard place, threatened death from his troops and devastation and loss in his town. Mutinous followers wish to stone him for the devastation of their city on the one hand, and on the other he faces the grim prospect of going after the marauders and attacking with limited forces.

> David was in great danger; for the people spoke of stoning him, because all the people were bitter in spirit for their sons and daughters. But David strengthened himself in the Lord his God.
>
> David said to the priest Abiathar son of Ahimelech, "Bring me the ephod." So Abiathar brought the ephod to David.
>
> David inquired of the Lord, "Shall I pursue this band? Shall I overtake them?"
>
> He answered him, "Pursue; for you shall surely overtake and shall surely rescue." (I, 30:6–8)

David pursues, and rescues, and sorts out the matter of who gets what in terms of spoil. Such is the repeated formula of David's success: trust in God; political savvy; military leadership; a spirit of generosity. And such generosity of spirit makes for good politics, the narrative insists.

2. ELICITING FROM FOLLOWERS AND RECIPROCATING NOT JUST LOYALTY BUT KINDNESS. Just before the confrontation between Israelites backing David's son Absalom and those remaining loyal to David, we are treated to a "vivid expression of loyalty to David's beleaguered forces"[11] from three supporters, including a foreigner and a very old man, Barzillai—who comes back for a repeat narrative appearance.[12] The trio "brought beds, basins, and earthen vessels, wheat, barley, meal, parched grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds, sheep, and cheese from the herd, for David and the people with him to eat; for they said, 'The troops are hungry and weary and thirsty in the wilderness'" (II, 17:27–29).

The unusual narrative detail, including everything from beds to honey and curds, indicates the textual insistence on highlighting the support David gets as not just loyalty, but a steadfast kindness, a loving loyalty—the same *hesed* mentioned so often in this story as characterizing God's response to David and God's people.

The *hesed* is reciprocal. A narrative moment later, after David's victory over Absalom, one of the trio bringing supplies, Barzillai, is singled out once again by the narrator. The repetition alerts the audience. Again, the unusual amount

of narrative detail and space given to this seemingly inconsequential matter indicates its importance:

> Now Barzillai the Gileadite had come down from Rogelim; he went on with the king to the Jordan, to escort him over the Jordan. Barzillai was a very aged man, eighty years old. He had provided the king with food while he stayed at Mahanaim, for he was a very wealthy man.
>
> The king said to Barzillai, "Come over with me, and I will provide for you in Jerusalem at my side."
>
> But Barzillai said to the king, "How many years have I still to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? Today I am eighty years old; can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king? Your servant will go a little way over the Jordan with the king. Why should the king recompense me with such a reward? Please let your servant return, so that I may die in my own town, near the graves of my father and my mother. . . .
>
> Then all the people crossed over the Jordan, and the king crossed over; the king kissed Barzillai and blessed him, and he returned to his own home." (II, 19:31–39)

This elderly Barzillai has a sense of humor, poetry, and resignation: "Can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks?" *Why bother with me?* he asks David, in effect.

David bothers with this decrepit old man just because. . . . Why? To what purpose? There is no apparent reason except for friendship, fondness, enjoyment. Barzillai poses no future threat, of course, and offers no further succor. It's just plain comaraderie, caring for another without any hope of personal gain: this rare kind of answer to Barzillai's *why bother with me* reveals the heart of David, of royalty capable of disinterested love. Such unnecessary plot details indicate their importance in establishing character. Troops and friends are loyal to David because David is loyal to his troops and friends.

The chiastic glimpses of David and his troops confirm what an alert audience has already heard.

3. LISTENING TO THE GENUINE WISDOM OF LOYAL PLEAS FROM THOSE LED. A great leader can (1) deal equitably and rigorously on behalf of *all* those led;

(2) elicit from warriors and the people not just loyalty but kindness; and (3) demonstrate the willingness to listen carefully to good advice from a full spectrum of persons, from the wise Abigail, the godly Nathan, the crude Joab, and even from those he leads, the troops.

A battle between those loyal to David and those swayed by Absalom is sandwiched between the two Barzillai episodes recounted above: a good-bye and a welcome-back: in the former, gifts of beds and food as David flees Absalom (17:27–29); in the latter, a gracious refusal of David's offer to reside in Jerusalem with the returning king (19:31–38). Framed by these reminders of a quiet greatness in David that elicits genuine friendship, then, we find the results of a king subject to fatherly indulgence, a battle between the king and his undisciplined son Absalom.

> Then David mustered the men who were with him, and set over them commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds. And David divided the army into three groups: one third under the command of Joab, one third under the command of Abishai son of Zeruiah, Joab's brother, and one third under the command of Ittai the Gittite.
>
> The king said to the men, "I myself will also go out with you."
>
> But the men said, "You shall not go out. For if we flee, they will not care about us. If half of us die, they will not care about us. But you are worth ten thousand of us; therefore it is better that you send us help from the city." (II, 18:1–3)

David defers to the judgment of his loyal and perceptive troops; it is difficult to avoid thinking in terms of the very true saying "Discretion is the better part of valor." Such wisdom is a more formidable strength than mere physical prowess. Anticipated here is what we hear now: "Abishai son of Zeruiah came to [David's] aid, and attacked the Philistine and killed him. Then David's men swore to him, 'You shall not go out with us to battle any longer, so that you do not quench the lamp of Israel'" (2 Sam. 21:17). David's initiative in battle and in politics is accompanied by a capacity to listen.

A great leader can deal equitably and rigorously on behalf of *all* those led, can elicit from warriors and the people in general not just loyalty but kindness, and can listen well.

These three anecdotes from the narrative proper—David rewarding the baggage handlers with spoils; the trio of friends assisting a desperate David with supplies; David's sensible deference to the wisdom of loyal troops—all confirm the chiastic conclusion that David is a superior leader, leagues different from Saul. A partial answer to what God saw in David that set him so

definitely apart from Saul comes into clearer view by virtue of leadership capacities.

Themes 3 and 3*: Poems, David's Blamelessness, Leadership—and God (II, 22:1–51; II, 23:1–7)

At the center of the theme composition are two poems by David. Here we come to the heart of the narrative matter—focused as only poetry can do. Herbert H. Klement makes this shrewd observation concerning the chiastic center point: "The two poetic pieces in 2 Sam. 22 and 23.1–7, which are placed by the theme-structure into the centre, appear to be of prime importance in determining both the theological tendency of the chiastically structured unit of the concluding chapters and also the intention of the literary structure of the whole book."[13] That the narrator intends to invest the centerpiece with such weight is borne out by considering the function of any poem embedded in this and other biblical narratives.[14]

In the first poem, we hear David saying that he is a person who trusts in God, who is loyal to a God loyal to him, who experiences deliverance from a faithfully responding God. Before this God, David claims, he is blameless. (In light of the whole story, how can this be true?) In the accompanying poem, David implicitly portrays himself as God's kind of leader, one dedicated to a rule of justice for the sake of communal well-being.

That we are to take these poems as the narrator's attempt to offer a clarifying assessment of David's character is made clear not only by reexamining details of the prior story in light of the chiastic conclusion, which I will do, but also by the noting the narrator's paralleling of David's poems with Hannah's poem, appearing early in the story. So it is that the whole story has bookend distillations of story meaning, the poem by Hannah and David's two poems, the latter echoing the former (see guide at the end of this chapter).[15]

Theme 3: Poem, God's Assistance, David's Blamelessness (II, 22:1–51)

No one, including Israel's greatest king, is perfect. As if to put the question of David's sinning in as problematic a way as possible, the story focuses not only on the disastrous sinning of David (theme 1*, next chapter), but on David's bald self-assessment here, "I was blameless before [God]." Why does—how can—the narrator select and highlight David's claim "I kept myself from guilt" (II, 22:24) when he so obviously is guilty of such wrongdoing as we have seen?

The chronicling of virtues in this portion of the poem has bothered almost all commentators with its possibility of gloss, or inappropriate didacticism.[16] Heard, however, from within a story with interlocking patterns that deal with both wrongdoing and right action, such a commonplace judgment appears quite problematic.[17]

We will focus our exploration on these claims of David, located in the poem's central section (II, 21–31). The first section alternates between praise of God's might in delivering David from enemies (II, 22:2–7) and focused praise to the God of cosmic power (8–16) back to God's deliverance (17–20). The last section returns to praise of God's might in delivering David from enemies (33–51).[18]

In the middle section of this long poem we find the seemingly impossible claim of David that he is blameless before the Lord (II, 22:21–32). The section begins with ten lines that form a mini-chiasm, emphasizing David's seemingly outrageous claim of blamelessness.

> **[a]** The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness;
> according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me.
> **[b]** For I have kept the ways of the Lord,
> and have not wickedly departed from my God.
> **[c]** For all his ordinances were before me,
> and from his statutes I did not turn aside.
> **[b*]** I was blameless before him,
> and I kept myself from guilt.
> **[a*]** Therefore the Lord has recompensed me according
> to my righteousness, according to my cleanness in his
> sight. (II, 22:21–25)

The story's David begins and ends this little chiasm with confidence in a conditional sort of favor from God—divine reward follows David's righteousness—as emphasized by the frame couplet's first lines: (a) *The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness. . . .* (b) *Therefore the Lord has recompensed me according to my righteousness. . . .* This claim follows up by answering an implicit question raised by the concluding verse of the first section, a section of praise to God the strong deliverer: [The Lord] brought me out into a broad place/ because he delighted in me" (22:20). For the first time in the poem, we have the claim that a *because* is involved. But what, then, is the reason for God to take such special delight in David as to prove his strong deliverer? The opening couplet of the central section answers: *Therefore the Lord has recompensed me according to my righteousness/according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me* (be-

ginning of stanza 2). God rewards David because of what delights God about David: his righteousness, his cleanness of hands. So David claims—with narrative warrant?

. . . *[A]ccording to the cleanness of my hands:* how are they any cleaner than Saul's? In fact, how can they not be that much more sullied, as measured by the wrongdoing from the first wantonly murderous design to take Nabal's life to the actual doing so, with Uriah, following adultery—to be followed by disregard of communal well-being in favor of catering to sons?

The last verses of this central stanza go some distance in explaining the conundrum by unfolding certain aspects of *tamim,* blamelessness: a complete loyalty to God that includes a sincere desire to turn around from wrong in faithful loyalty to God's ways. *With the loyal you show yourself loyal.* Loyalty is followed by blamelessness—consecutive lines.

> With the loyal you show yourself loyal;
> with the blameless you show yourself blameless;
> with the pure you show yourself pure,
> and with the crooked you show yourself perverse.
> You deliver a humble people,
> but your eyes are upon the haughty to bring them down.
> Indeed, you are my lamp, O Lord,
> the Lord lightens my darkness.
> By you I can crush a troop,
> and by my God I can leap over a wall.
> This God—his way is perfect;
> the promise of the Lord proves true;
> he is a shield for all who take refuge in him.
> For who is God, but the Lord?
> And who is a rock, except our God? (22:26–32)

Bold claims, indeed, but at least David is careful to suggest that all rests on God, as "lamp," as source of strength, as "perfect," as keeper of promises, as "shield," and finally, tying in with the framing stanzas, as "rock" (as we will see, a key term in Hannah's poem).

A premature disbelief rises here, a judgment that David scores himself highly on precisely what doesn't seem true about him, namely:

- Loyalty (v. 26)
- Purity, pureness of motive (opposite of "crooked," v. 27)
- Humility (v. 28)

- Right action, righteousness (vv. 21, 25)
- Cleanness of hands (v. 21)

Loyalty? Increasingly throughout the story, this appears to be the case, a steadfastness both in terms of consulting God, thanking God—and confessing wrongs to God immediately, with no resistance or defense. When directed or confronted by word from God, David never balks. Once he gets "angry because the Lord had burst forth with an outburst upon Uzzah," the would-be steadier of the ark, God's presence, God's covenant (II, 6:8). After a period of fearfulness and delay, however, David completes the task of bringing the ark back home to Israel, celebrating the presence and covenant of God with all of God's people (II, 6:16–19).[19] The loyalty between David and God is reciprocal, it appears.

Purity? Contrary to the prevailing skepticism among scholars, I have argued that David's motives throughout the story can be seen as pure, an appropriate synergy between political savvy and genuine God-devotedness, starting back with his slaying of Goliath in the name of the Lord while insisting on a reward that is political—a good thing, given David's anointing by Samuel and Saul's resistance to this anointing.[20]

Humility? The essence of humility is the capacity to listen well, responding appropriately when truth is heard. David does this exquisitely well, especially if viewed from a perspective of the pattern of wrongdoing and response, explored in the following chapter.

Righteousness? Integrity? Not always perfect in action or motive (the cover-up of adultery by murder being the most egregious example), David's spirit is gradually uncovered as holding a deep desire to do better. This growing integrity, a determination to have action follow awareness of the right thing, is illustrated throughout the story. At his lowest point, fleeing from Absalom, David refuses the temptation to take along the ark, for possible good fortune. Confronted by God's word concerning his adultery, cover-up, and murder, David's response is immediate: "I have sinned against the Lord" (II, 12:13). Confronted by a foulmouthed Shimei while fleeing from Absalom, David makes the simple observation, in response to Abishai's demand for killing the fellow, that perhaps God has Shimei cursing David for good reason (II, 16:10, 12). Such openness to the possibility of his own wrongdoing suggests a keen sense of what is right, and a desire to act accordingly. The spirit of Psalm 51, attributed to David, is applicable: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, / and put a right spirit within me," and "blot out my transgressions . . . cleanse me from my sin" (vv. 10, 1–2).

Cleanness of hands? David maintains cleanness of hands, the story intimates, by getting them washed. The apparent audacity of David's claim of clean hands and blamelessness is understood only within the entire pattern of David's wrongdoing. After acknowledging his sin with Bathsheba and Uriah, for example, the prophet Nathan tells David, "The Lord has put away your sin" (II, 12:13). Sin put away leaves the person without the sin. "I pray you," David pleads to God in the last instance of wrongdoing (II, 24, pattern 11), "take away the guilt of your servant" (24:10).

Can this story's God not only put away the sin but also *take away the guilt*—rid the hand of stain? This story demonstrates a yes—though not without serious consequences to those who do wrong.

The story as a whole demonstrates the essential truth of David's claim that "all [God's] ordinances were before me, / and from his statutes I did not turn aside," an assertion of an ultimate commitment that allows appropriate response to wrongdoing, to deviation from those ordinances and statues. David's cleanness of hands is a turning away from wrongdoing that elicits from the story's God a putting away of sin (II, 12:13). Such a dynamic places David in the great line of faulty but finally faithful patriarchs in other Hebrew narratives: "Walk before me," the Lord says to Abraham; "be blameless."[21] In fact, the story shows Abraham on his way to just such a blamelessness before God.[22]

David can be seen as claiming blamelessness in the explicit sense of the psalmist's plea, and claim:

> Your servant pays heed [to the Lord's judgments];
> in obeying them there is great reward.
> Who can be aware of errors?
> Clear me of unperceived guilt,
> and from willful sins keep your servant;
> let them not dominate me;
> *then I shall be blameless*
> and clear of grave offense.
> (Ps. 19:11–13, *Jewish Study Bible* [19:12–14]; emphasis mine)

Far from an achievement of perfection, blamelessness includes an acknowledgment of hidden error, of one's potential for willful sins, and a prayerfulness regarding both hidden error and willful sins. So it is that the king sets an example for all of God's people.[23]

When the narrator shows David claiming to be "blameless before God," then, the emphasis is on keeping hands clean by having guilt taken away:

> I was blameless before him,
> and I kept myself from guilt. (II, 22:24)

> David was stricken to the heart because he had numbered the people. David said to the Lord, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O Lord, I pray you, take away the guilt of your servant; for I have done very foolishly." (II, 24:10).

How has David "kept [himself] from guilt"? By asking God: "take away the guilt of your servant."

To put the matter another way: keeping oneself from guilt, in David's story, does not imply keeping oneself from wrongdoing. To be cleansed of guilt rests on the assumption that wrongdoing—the lack of perfection—is inevitable. To avoid sinning is impossible for David or any other major character in the Hebrew Scriptures.[24] "There is no one who does not sin," the narrator records David's son Solomon as saying (I Kings 8:46). But if guilt is taken away by God, says this story, the person is without guilt.

David credits himself with blamelessness and then credits God. "You are my lamp, O Lord," David says, "the Lord [who] lightens my darkness" II, 22:29 The connection between David's blamelessness and God's lamp-presence is in the overcoming of David's "darkness." David feels overwhelmed by enemies out there, and by the enemy within, progressing to the high form of self-consciousness in confronting his own worst self (chapter 9).

The king is capable of being enlightened, challenged, illumined: the three citations of lamp in David's story reveal David as the "lamp of Israel," but framed by God as lamp—of Israel, of David (I, 3:3; II, 21:17; II, 22:29).

As lamp for David, God is David's judge and ultimate seer. It is not before humankind that David speaks of his blamelessness; rather, "I was blameless before [God]." Before God David sees himself standing—as guilt-free, as hands-washed, as sins-put-away, as blameless. *The Lord has put away your sin*, says Nathan.

Removing guilt—sin taken away, cleaning one's hands before God—would have been part of the cultural and textual furniture for the audience of David's story.[25] Saul serves as foil to David in no more striking way than in this matter of guilt removal, and its prerequisite: humility (capacity to listen to another) and defenseless acknowledgment of wrongdoing (chapter 1).

The story of David, Saul, and God that precedes the chiastic conclusion prepares us for accepting David's perspective on the matter of sin put away, of blameless standing before God.

Hannah's poem, as mentioned, is echoed most especially in the first and third sections of this long poem (Psalm 18 is essentially the same poem as 22:2–

51), and also by David's second poem that follows the first. The parallels are instructive (see pattern guide at the end of this chapter). We will look at one such parallel, that of David's experience of God as Rock. The image is found in all three poems: Hannah's and the two by David (the two poems by David constitute the center point of the chiastic conclusion, a point to be kept in mind).

Hannah's poem

> There is no Holy One like the Lord,
> no one besides you;
> there is no *Rock* like our God. (I, 2:2)

David, first poem (Hannah's poem, II, 22:2–51)

> my God, my *Rock*, in whom I take refuge,
> my shield and the horn of my salvation,
> my stronghold and my refuge,
> my savior; you save me from violence. (22:3)
>
> For who is God, but the Lord?
> And who is a *Rock*, except our God? (22:32)
> The Lord lives! Blessed be my Rock,
> and exalted be my God, the *Rock* of my salvation, (22:47)
> The God of Israel has spoken,
> the Rock of Israel has said to me. . . . (23:3)

The rock in Hannah's poem, while implicitly her personal rock of strength, is a divine constancy that makes things move: this rock is Holy, steadfast in bringing down the mighty; making the rich beg for bread while feeding bread to the hungry; allowing the barren, like Hannah, to conceive; raising up the poor to seats of honor. In the poem by David, the rock functions as his personal salvation—God as deliverer and strength giver, the One who exalts, just as Hannah's poem implies reversals in fortune. As "rock of my salvation," God is *exalted* by David, who himself is *exalted* by God.

How did God come to be David's rock, a deliverer extraordinaire for this king? On God's side, there was something seen in David's heart, a thing mortals can't see, that made him suitable to be Saul's replacement; for David's part, he "called upon the Lord" in his distress (22:7). The story of David has been insisting on David's willingness to consult God before facing enemies.[26]

If the reader is is disposed toward a negative view of David, the words "you exalted me above my adversaries," among the last lines of David's first

poem (22:49), can suggest braggadocio.[27] In fact, the narrator accomplishes the complex feat of revealing a David who is exalted, who knows it, but who gives God credit as "a tower of salvation," the One who exalts.

God is the ultimate source of military achievement in David's poem: "The Lord . . . sent out arrows, and scattered them . . . and routed them" (II, 22:14–15). As Herbert H. Klement understands, "the fact that the metaphors used to name God can all be understood as having a military connotation ties in with the theme of the psalm, the substance of which is summarized in . . . 22.4: that David was given help against his enemies when he placed his trust in Yahweh."[28] And so it is that David can say "You exalted me above my enemies" (v. 47) but trump it with "exalted be my God, the rock of my salvation" (22:49).

Hannah's poem concludes with precisely the same thought as David's: "The Lord . . . will give strength to his king,/ and exalt the power of his anointed" (I, 2:10). David's poem brings the story full circle from Hannah's: "God is a tower of salvation for his king. . . . [God] shows steadfast devotion to his anointed" (22:51, last verse). David is exalted, David exalts God: again, we find in the story a synergy between David's political climb and his reliance on God. Klement notes that

> according to the ideal portrayed in the experience of David's reign, the potentialities of Yahweh are to be included among the facts of political realism. This conclusion follows from the emphasis placed upon David's attitude in the narrative texts as well, and also from the theological alignment of the psalm of thanksgiving in the centre of the concluding section of the book.[29]

And for what purpose is this God involved at all, with Hannah, with David, with Saul? Part of the answer is Klement's observation, above that for this story "the potentialities of Yahweh are to be included among the facts of political realism." The parallel poem by David illustrates God's purpose in this special relationship he enjoys.

Theme 3: Poem,* **God's Ideal Ruler—and David** *(II, 23:1–7)*

In the companion poem to David's first and long poem, at the heart of the chiasm, is a short though crucial poem in terms of reflecting the whole story. Here David's special status before God is viewed by David himself as a commission, a carrying out of the divine desire for communal rather than merely personal well-being. He has been chosen for leadership of the "people," the "descendants." The transition from the first to the second poem makes the point.

Last verse of poem 1:

> [God] is a tower of salvation for his king,
> and shows steadfast love to his anointed,
> to David and his descendants forever. (II, 22:51)

Opening lines of poem 2:

> Now these are the last words of David:
> The oracle of David, son of Jesse,
> the oracle of the man whom God exalted,
> the anointed of the God of Jacob,
> the favorite of the Strong One of Israel:
> The spirit of the Lord speaks through me,
> his word is upon my tongue.
> The God of Israel has spoken,
> the Rock of Israel has said to me:
> One who rules over people justly,
> ruling in the fear of God,
> is like the light of morning,
> like the sun rising on a cloudless morning,
> gleaming from the rain on the grassy land (II, 23:1–4).

Here, in the echoing poem, we find the purpose of all the delivering of the prior poem: David is the political leader of God's people, responsible for their well-being.[30]

The poem insists on two things, one a corollary of the other: the good ruler is exalted by God because he "rules over people justly . . . in the fear of God," while bad rulers are annihilated because in their godlessness they make trouble for the people. These are like thorns that prove so troublesome as to need special measures for removal (II, 23:6–7). With these lines of what needs to be averted by a ruler "whom God exalted," the poem ends (23:1). We come full circle, back to what is important about the right kind of leader in light of the wrong kind of leader.

So here, at the very least, is David's confessed aspiration, an ideal worth pursuing with all of one's strength: *Oh, to be such a one "who rules over people justly."*

In striking contrast to Saul, David values highly what he has pursued: communal good, rather than mere self-promotion. Saul pauses between battles and kingly responsibilities to erect a monument to himself (I, 15:12) and goes on to sacrifice proper rule of his people to the jealous pursuit of David. Rule such as David's, on the other hand, "aspires to be like the light of

morning, / like the sun rising on a cloudless morning, / gleaming from the rain on the grassy land." This is David's picture of *shalom,* the communal well-being desired by the God of this story.

David takes his poetic time to reflect on how the people feel under just rule, what communal well-being is like. Within this large view of things, David can go on to speak of his "house":

> Is not my house like this with God?
> For he has made with me an everlasting covenant,
> ordered in all things and secure.
> Will he not cause to prosper
> all my help and my desire? (stanza 2)

At his best, David would have his house exist for the people, and so God is "all [David's] help" and his "desire." God's desire becomes, however imperfectly, David's desire. For what, then, does David long? The poem opens with the answer: communal well-being, the people's experience of sun dancing on rain-soaked grass.

This godly king's responsibility is to provide such a community of well-being as to lead all the people away from the ever-present danger of becoming like all the godless ones who will be "entirely consumed in fire." The contrast between rulers godly and the godless ones is exquisite: the godless, like thorns whose riddance requires an iron bar or spear shaft; the godly one, whose rule is like a sweet *shalom* of sun after rain.

Conclusion

The doubled warrior lists of themes 2 and 2* invite a retrospective of the entire preceding story of David by way of the emphasis on the devotion and loyalty commanded by the king. Each warrior list is accompanied by those little stories that tell so much about the character of David and what the king elicited from his followers. That Absalom was able to muster troops might seem to challenge this picture of troop loyalty to David, but perhaps the point is that even at his weakest and most fallible point of reign, King David retained a sufficient force to defeat Absalom. At his best, David was able to unite Israel and extend its boundaries, while ruling justly.

From themes 3 and 3*: "One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of morning"—and we recall the weary troops, left behind to guard the baggage, given equal recompense against the protests of the strong; the weary king, "worth ten thousand of us," protected by his troops;

Pattern Eleven: Hannah's Early Poem, David's Late Poems

	HANNAH'S PRAYER I Sam 2:1–10	DAVID'S PSALM II Sam 22:2–51	DAVID'S LAST WORDS II Sam 23:1–7
GOD: ROCK	"There is no rock like our God."	"the LORD is my rock . . . in whom I take refuge . . . Who is a rock, except our God? Blessed be my rock!"	"The Rock of Israel has said to me. . . . "
GOD: THUNDER	"the Most High will thunder in Heaven."	"the LORD thundered from heaven."	
FOR ME: DELIVERANCE	"my mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory."	"The Lord is . . . my deliverer."	"Will [God] not cause to prosper all my help and my desire?" II, 23:5
FOR ME: STRENGTH	"my strength is exalted in my God."	"my God . . . in whom I take refuge . . . my stronghold and my refuge."	"Is not my house like this with God? He has made with me an everlasting covenant."
FOR ME: ANOINTED	"[God] will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed."	"[God] is a tower of salvation for his king, and shows steadfast love to his anointed, to David and his descendants forever."	"The oracle of David, son of Jesse, the oracle of the man whom God exalted, the anointed of the God of Jacob; . . . [God] has made an eternal covenant with me, in all order, well assured."
FOR LOWLY: REVERSALS	"[the LORD] brings low, he also exalts."	"You deliver a humble people, but your eyes are upon the haughty to bring them down."	"Will [God] not cause to prosper all my help and desire? But the godless are all like thorns that are thrown away.""

(continued)

Pattern Eleven: Hannah's Early Poem, David's Late Poems (*continued*)

	HANNAH'S PRAYER I Sam 2:1–10	DAVID'S PSALM II Sam 22:2–51	DAVID'S LAST WORDS II Sam 23:1–7
FOR RIGHTEOUS: REWARD	"[God] will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness."	"The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me. With the loyal you show yourself loyal; with the blameless you show yourself blameless."	"One who rules over people justly, ruling in the fear of God, is like the light of the morning . . . Is not my house like this with God? . . . But the godless are all like thorns that are thorn away."
RESPONSE: EXULTATION	"My heart exults in the LORD; there is no Holy One like the LORD."	"My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my savior; you save me from violence."	

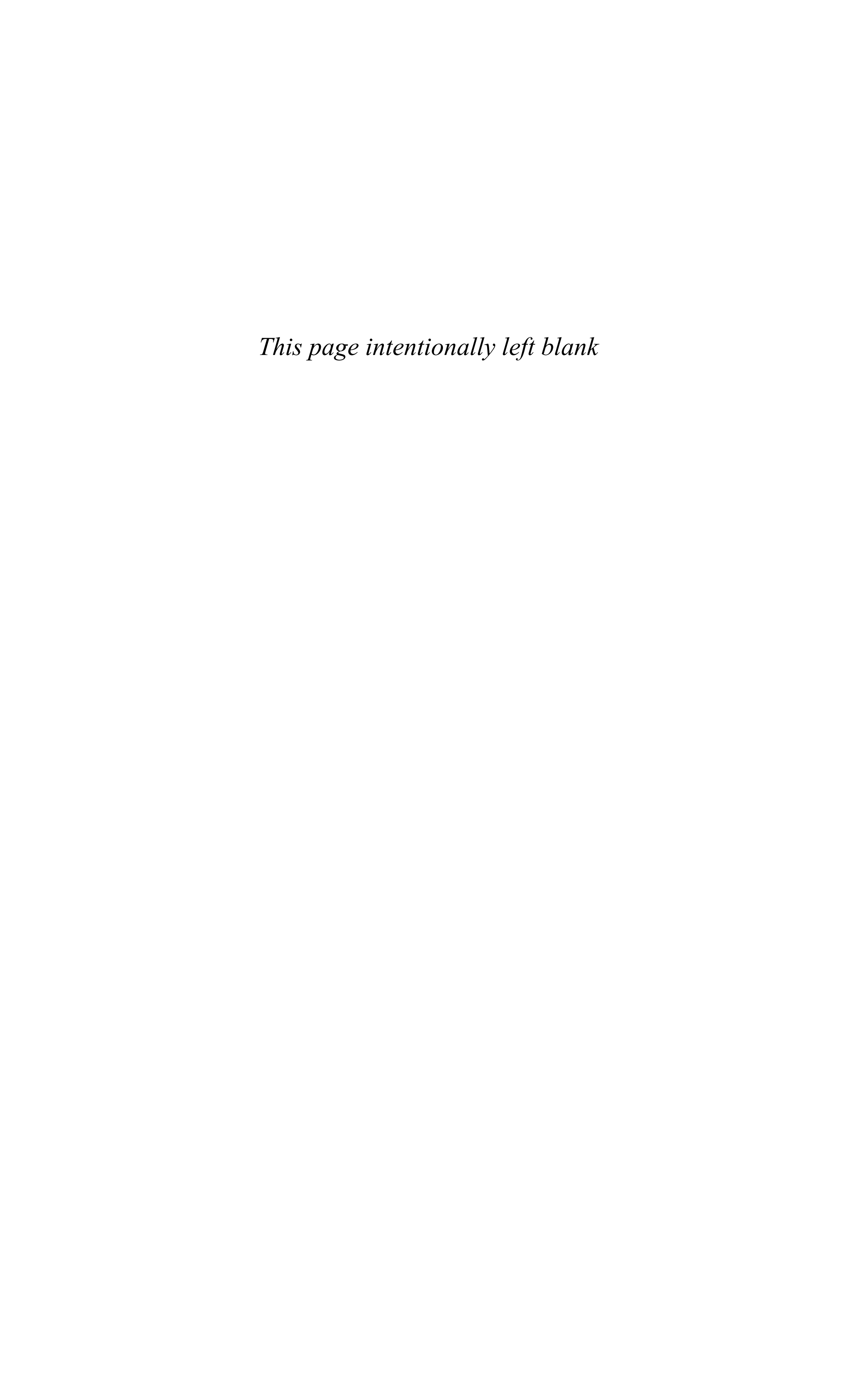
an eighty-year-old friend, Barzillai, lacking the taste for the food and pleasure of David's offered court life, kissed goodbye; a trio of warriors risking life for love of their wistfully thirsty king, who returns their loving loyalty with the greatest respect.

A close hearing of the doubled warrior lists, and of the back-to-back poems, might be sufficient to indicate that the four concluding chapters of II Samuel are far from the commonly ascribed "appendix" or devolution of narrative meaning into an older theological vision and/or gloss.[31] The story as a whole and the chiastic conclusion are of a piece, the conclusion bringing into focus previous narrative matter.

We have seen David as a mystery because David is represented as fully human and fully conscious. The lines of another psalmist could well be an overview of these back-to-back poems by David within this chiasm: "I will study the way that is blameless. When shall I attain it? I will walk with integrity of heart within my house" (Psalm 101:2). "Integrity of heart," especially "within my house," has been for David an ideal imperfectly realized but most often striven for.

David's story is one whose larger context is a story of God and politics, of God's desire for communal well-being, of God's faithful if flexible support of that goal. Disappointed with the divine choice of Saul, who is fearful from the start and only gets worse, God turns around from choice number one to choice number two, a better man. God's change of mind in favor of someone "better than" Saul has required of the audience a close attention as to what might constitute "better." Toward the political goal God is shown to have in mind, what is the truly *good,* in terms of leadership: on what basis is *better* to be determined? The story has been answering, and offers final resolution to questions about David, Saul, and God in this chiastic conclusion.

Suggested by the chiasm's frame (themes 1 and 1), which I explore next, we find not only the explicit contrast between the wrongdoing of David and Saul, but the concluding instance of an interlocking pattern that focuses on David's sinning—his near disastrous failure as a leader of Israel. Here, in a most unlikely context, we find what is truly remarkable about our mystery man. In this outermost theme—the last of I and II Samuel, we discover a focus on the primary dynamic among Saul, David, and God.*



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9

Chiastic Conclusion: Final Contrast, Soul and David Sinning

Patterns 10 (B) and 11

From the story's beginning, we have heard of Saul's failure of nerve, a fearfulness unchecked and leading to paralleled instances of wrongdoing (chapter 1). God cancels the divine choice of Saul and chooses David— who commits monstrous wrongdoing with great harm to the people he leads. The chiastic frame, rings 1 and 1, brings this critical narrative concern to a conclusive focus. The second part of the chiastic frame, ring 1* (the last chapter in the Book of Samuel), interlocks with another pattern (pattern 11): four instances of David's wrongdoing and response, emphasizing the centrality of the narrative's concern with leaders acting wrongfully, at the expense of the community. Ring 1* of pattern 10 doubles as the fourth instance of the sinning pattern.*

Ring 1: Saul Sins, Blame? Three Years Plague, Resolution (II, 21:1–14)

Ring 2: David's Warriors, Leadership (II, 21:15–22)

Ring 3: David's Poem: Blamelessness and God (II, 22:1–51)

Ring 3: David's Poem: Ideal Leader, and God (II, 23:1–7)*

Ring 2: David's Warriors, Leadership (II, 23:8–39)*

Ring 1*: David Sins: Blame? 3 Days Plague, Resolution (II, 24:1–25)**

#1, David Sins: Abigail Confronts (I, 25)

#2, David Sins: Nathan Confronts (II, 11:1–12:25)

#3, David Sins: Joab Confronts (II, 19:1–8)
#4, Also Ring 1* above: David Sins: David Confronts (II, 24:1–25)

In his always insightful study, Herbert H. Klement notes that "the narrative framework of the concluding chapters [Saul sinning, David sinning] provides in summary form a final comparison of Saul and David. What strikes one first is the fact that the two kings should once again be compared with each other in this concluding section at all."[1] We will see how this final contrast makes explicit not only what the rest of the chiastic conclusion has implied, but what has been running throughout the entire story of Israel's first two leaders, one a model of a good king, the other of a bad king.

The first part of the chiasm's frame, theme 1, cites Saul's treacherous breaking of a treaty with a neighboring people. The consequence is a three-year famine visited by God on those ruled by Saul. The closing frame of theme 1* is an echoing sin by David, whose taking of a census leads to a three-day pestilence and seventy thousand dead.

*Theme **1: Saul Sins—Blame, Three Years Plague** (II, 21:1–14)*

The root cause of Saul's sinful breaking of a peace treaty with the Gibeonites is "zeal for the people of Israel" (II, 21:2). Breaking a covenantal relationship is, apparently, a very bad thing. There is a curse on all of Israel as a result.

> Now there was a famine in the days of David for three years, year after year; and David inquired of the Lord.
>
> The Lord said, "There is bloodguilt on Saul and on his house, because he put the Gibeonites to death."
>
> So the king called the Gibeonites and spoke to them. (Now the Gibeonites were not of the people of Israel, but of the remnant of the Amorites; although the people of Israel had sworn to spare them, Saul had tried to wipe them out in his zeal for the people of Israel and Judah.)
>
> David said to the Gibeonites, "What shall I do for you? How shall I make expiation, that you may bless the heritage of the Lord?" (II, 21:1–3)

The people of Israel had sworn to spare them, and yet their leader, *in his zeal for the people,* incurs bloodguilt from God for his slaughter. Here is a familiar

pattern: the people led by Saul have better sense than their king; in fact, the king creates great difficulty for the people (see chapter 1).

> The Gibeonites said to him, "It is not a matter of silver or gold between us and Saul or his house; neither is it for us to put anyone to death in Israel."
>
> [David] said, "What do you say that I should do for you?"
>
> They said to the king, "The man who consumed us and planned to destroy us, so that we should have no place in all the territory of Israel—let seven of his sons be handed over to us, and we will impale them before the Lord at Gibeon on the mountain of the Lord."
>
> The king said, "I will hand them over." (II, 21:4–6)

This wiping out of Saul's seven sons in one fell swoop creates suspicion for some readers. There is little doubt for many commentators that this incident is a late writer's gloss attempting to explain away obvious malfeasance on the "real" David's part in his bloody rise to Saul's throne.[2] Perhaps. What we notice, however, is the tightly knit fabric of narrative tapestry that ties Saul's zealous foolishness back to where he started.

The Gibeonites' demand for seven of Saul's sons instead of money is, as Hans Hertzberg notes, "in accordance with the law of tribal membership."[3] David complies, and the proffered sons of Saul are slain.

Such overwrought action of Saul in breaking a peace treaty recalls the serious endangerment of Saul's men in an earlier case of zeal and wrongdoing. Working with Jonathan, "the Lord gave Israel the victory." Jonathan was recognized by the people as the one "who has accomplished this great victory in Israel" (I, 14:23, 45). Simultaneously, in his zeal, "Saul committed a very rash act on that day"—the very day "the Lord gave Israel victory" through Jonathan (I, 14:23, 24). Saul's deep-seated problem had resurfaced, back there, as a fear-based need for revenge, a capacity to ruin even a good thing: eat no food, he demanded of his troops, until "I have been avenged on my enemies" (I, 14:24). Vengeful action, for this story's Saul, can always be traced back to a fearfulness manifesting itself as misplaced zeal (again, see chapter 1). Only the courage and ire of the people Saul is supposed to be leading circumvents disaster: the Israelites finally say no to their king when Jonathan's life is about to be sacrificed by his father. Their appropriate response works, in spite of Saul, and good prevails. "And so the people ransomed Jonathan" (I, 14;45).[4]

Concerning the Gibeonites, Saul's zeal leads to a breaching of a covenant having to do with tribal rights and responsibilities.[5] This going-back on a pledge of peace with the Gibeonites brings three years of suffering to God's

people. The two wrongs are paralleled: Saul's foolish vow and foolish breaking of covenant stem from the same problem, a fear-based zeal, the need to make sure, to engage in precipitous action, a heinous wrong. The heart of Saul's wrongdoing comes to a conclusive focus. David does what he can, which the prior story has indicated has always been true of him: "David inquired of the Lord," followed by "The Lord said" (I, 23:2, 4; II, 2:1; 5:19; 5:23; Saul inquires of the Lord, also, but not until after or during periods of wrongdoing[6]). The narrator is weaving much detail from the prior story into this brief but critical account of Saul's wrongdoing and David's righting the matter.

The king proceeds to honor Saul's house by retrieving the bones of the seven sons for proper burial. "In contrast to [the ignominy of their being hanged]," Klement points out, "their dignified burial by David stands out as an extraordinarily magnanimous gesture. It can only be ascribed to David's charity that the sons of Saul in their death should be able to rest in their family tomb at all, something to which those who had been hanged had no claim."[7]

The seriousness of a leader's wrongdoing is measured by communal ill-health: three years of famine. Unspoken is Saul's nonresponse to the mess he created. Now, the people of Israel are restored by David's response to the curse to the fruitfulness of their fields and, presumably, peace with the Gibeonites.

Such wrongdoing and consequence echo episodes from the larger story, including the narrator's rationale for monarchy in Israel—a monarchy that implicitly offered hope for resolution to the tribal horror under the judges, when, as the narrator has been repeating, "there was no king in Israel" (Judg. 19:1; 21:25).[8] But King Saul begins his reign (as he ends it) in fear, wrongdoing, and confusion. Saul's manner of confessing wrong has been compromised by defensiveness, along with a plea for good standing with the people, a clutching to the status of royalty that leads to a mad pursuit of David.[9]

With David we find something quite different, the single most important aspect of character that distinguishes David from Saul. Robert Polzin finds the significant difference between David's story and Saul's not so much in their respective responses to wrongdoing as in what happens, or is foretold as happening, to their respective houses and fortunes.[10] However true, we find in this chiastic conclusion a gathering together of the major dynamics of the story in such a way as to highlight character distinctions, not mere differences in fortune.

Theme 1: David Sins: Blame, Three Days Plague (II, 24:1–25)*

From Saul's sinning and three years of deadly consequence, we move to the echo: David sins, with three days of deadly consequence. We never hear of

Saul's response to the sinning, though we know of prior falterings. David not only responds to his sinning appropriately, but with a notable twist within the pattern of David' sin-confrontation-response that interlocks with theme 1*.

With God changing the divine mind in favor of David, we might have expected a leader exempt from wrongdoing, or at least someone less egregious in his wrongdoing. But David sins, and sins, and sins. His last wrongdoing, recorded in theme 1*, is his worst, if measured by consequence: seventy thousand of his people die in three days because of his move of taking a census—presumably for ensuring troop strength.

To understand the significance of this wrongdoing in establishing David's character, the audience must view it—hear it—as yet another instance within a four-part pattern of David's sinning, in addition to its providing the final frame of the final chapter of II Samuel. Accordingly, I shall first explore the first three wrongdoings, and then take up theme 1* as the fourth and final instance of a pattern centered on the wrongdoing of David. What emerges clearly is the stark difference in the sinning of Saul and that of David, another key factor that distinguishes David from Saul.

B. Pattern 11, David and Wrongdoing-Confrontation-Response-Consequence

The two patterns—the concluding chiasm (pattern 10) and this pattern of David's sinning (pattern 11)—interlock in a very clear way, in that theme 1* of pattern 10 is also, as mentioned, the fourth instance of pattern 11.

As with other patterns we have explored, these instances of sin-confrontation-consequence-response suggest the remarkably complex yet singular character of David, but more especially the coherence and dramatic integrity of the David story taken as a whole. This and other patterns bring into a unifying vision blocks of material that many biblical scholars consider quite disparate. It is primarily through such patterns of repetition that we gain understanding that David is a mystery—a mystery that is solved by the end of the story.[11]

Instance 1, David Sins; Abigail Confronts (I, 25)

(A) THE SINNING. In both instances of sparing Saul, David has referred to himself before King Saul as a mere "flea" (I, 24:14; 26:20).[12] In the episode between, David hears a report of Nabal's belittling question: "Who is this David?" Nabal goes on to denigrate David. "There are many servants today who are breaking away from their masters" (I, 25:10).

As we later find out from the wise intuition of Nabal's own wife, David has felt mightily slighted, ridiculed (I, 25:25–26). The God-favored David might be able to afford referring to himself as a mere flea before King Saul, but in the face of a putdown from a boor, he rises up in peevish and deadly anger. "In *the name of David,*" the servants had said in putting their request to Nabal; Nabal in his response has reduced *the name of David* to a joke not worth taking seriously.

As we will recall, David responds to the words of Nabal briefly, or so we hear at first: "Every man strap on his sword!" (I, 25:13). Only later, as David races toward his murderous goal, are we given a flashback to words the narrator has delayed in order to form an exquisite juxtaposition with the life-giving words of Nabal's wife.

> Now David had said, "Surely it was in vain that I protected all that this fellow has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that belonged to him; but he has returned me evil for good. *I'll be God-damned [may God to this to me and more] if I leave alive a single person by morning who pisses against the wall.*" (I, 25:21–22)[13]

(B) THE CONFRONTATION. The oath-taking, vulgar, and murderous sentiment of David is juxtaposed immediately to words of an intermediary, a woman coming up the mountain to meet him:

> Now then, my lord, as the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, since the Lord has restrained you from bloodguilt and from taking vengeance with your own hand, now let your enemies and those who seek to do evil to my lord be like Nabal. . . . When the Lord has done to my lord according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you prince over Israel, my lord shall have no cause of grief, or pangs of conscience, for having shed blood without cause or for having saved himself. (I, 25:26, 30–31)

On what basis should David not take seriously, not take personally, the belittling refusal of Nabal the fool? My lord, Abigail points out to David, you are "bound in the bundle of the living under the care of the Lord your God" (v. 29). This is confrontation of a most encouraging sort.

(C) THE RESPONSE. Not minimizing the seriousness of David's wrong in making his murderous way toward Nabal, the text nonetheless shows David immediately transformed into a person acknowledging "good sense" while verbally falling all over himself with offering of blessing:

> David said to Abigail, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you to meet me today! Blessed be your good sense, and blessed be you, who have kept me today from bloodguilt and from avenging myself by my own hand! For as surely as the Lord the God of Israel lives, who has restrained me from hurting you, unless you had hurried and come to meet me, truly by morning there would not have been left to Nabal so much as one male." (I, 25:32–34)

"Male," not *"[any] who pisses against the wall."* David's capacity to listen is accompanied by an eloquent response in which he praises she who confronts. He turns around and goes home, vengeful mission canceled, halted by a woman's gracious words.

Nabal's death leads to marriage between the lady and future king. This fairy-tale episode, concluding with a most serendipitous happy ending expresses a tough-minded realism: there is something deep within David that is gravely wrong, and is strikingly right. The latter reveals his need and capacity for true repentance, a radical reorientation of spirit and action.

Must David spare not only God's anointed but also an insulting boor? Yes, but here, only through the agency of a beautiful and intelligent woman.

If this were only one isolated instance of David's wrongdoing and good response to being confronted, we might think it an aberration of a character otherwise callow and inconsistent—or so contradictory as to be just plain unknowable. One such turn-around cannot establish a character as fundamentally responsive and morally tuned.

(D) THE CONSEQUENCE(S). There are no actual consequences, only their fortunate avoidance. In confronting David, Abigail has suggested that if David carries through on his bloody and vengeful plans, he would suffer "cause of grief" and "pangs of conscience" (I, 25:31). Also strongly implied is the reaction of God to what would be "bloodguilt" (I, 25:26, 33).[14]

Instance 2, David Sins; Nathan Confronts (II, 11–12:25)

(A) DAVID'S SINNING. David commits adultery and compounds the wrong with cover-up. The other man's wife, Bathsheba, is pregnant by David. His elaborate scheming to avoid disclosure include making the pregnancy look as if it were the fruit of conjugal relations, and finally engineering the death of a husband who might talk. The indulgence of private David spreads out to affect the public.[15] Bathsheba's husband Uriah had been fighting courageously against the enemies of God's people before David arranges to have Uriah

killed. David's indulgence of the perks of royalty, however normal for that time and place, leads him on a sordid trail of wrongdoing whose consequence is the near loss of kingship itself and chaos in Israel, which God has entrusted to him.

(B) DAVID CONFRONTED. At the end of it all, with Uriah dead and Bathsheba taken by David in marriage, God sends the prophet Nathan to the king. In the prior instance of wrongdoing, intermediary Abigail met David with astonishing words of grace. Here, Nathan tells David a nasty little story.

> There were two men in a certain city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had very many flocks and herds; but the poor man had nothing but one little ewe lamb, which he had bought. He brought it up, and it grew up with him and with his children; it used to eat of his meager fare, and drink from his cup, and lie in his bosom, and it was like a daughter to him. Now there came a traveler to the rich man and he was loath to take one of his own flock or herd to prepare for the wayfarer who had come to him, but he took the poor man's lamb, and prepared that for the guest who had come to him. (II, 12:1–4)

"Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man," a response apparently anticipated by a storytelling, prophet aware of a tale's magic power to deeply engage a man like David "Nathan said to David, 'You are the man!'" (II, 12:5–7) The intermediary between God and David rehearses what God has done for David, the evil with which David has requited God, and finally the crime-fitting punishment from God of a troubled house, public exposure, and wives given away (II, 12:7–12). It is a devastating picture of loss and humiliation.

(C) DAVID'S RESPONSE. "David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord' " (II, 12:13).

What is the audience to make of David's stark response? We note that God's anger is greatly kindled against David, while David's anger is greatly kindled against the horrible man in the grim little story. (David shares at least this in common with God: both are bothered mightily by oppressive self-aggrandizement).

As a youth on the run, David had been interrupted from wrongdoing by a woman intermediary; he immediately turned around from his intended murderous goal. Here we have no youth on the run but a king in full power. But again, he simply listens. Then speaks. "I have sinned against the Lord."

(D) CONSEQUENCE—AND MORE RESPONSE. *God forgives you,* David hears from the intermediary, but “because by this deed you have utterly scorned the Lord, the child that is born to you shall die” (II, 12:13–15). In a sense we return to how David responds—first to the confrontation (so different from Saul) and second, to news of the consequence. When the infant grows fatally ill, David pleads with God, fasting and lying on the ground for seven days and nights. When learning of the child’s death, David’s acquiescence to God’s verdict is immediate, uncomplaining—and remarked on as most unusual by his associates: he “washed, anointed himself, and changed his clothes” and went to the house of the Lord in order to worship (II, 12:14–20).

David does not protest. Recall the prior pattern of Saul’s wrongoing: the fearful, talkative, and self-interested defensiveness of Saul, twice, in response to the intermediary who has confronted him (chapter 1).

You are on the way to bloodguilt, the female intermediary had said to David—who without hesitation reverses his vindictive goal of slaying Nabal. You are the man, the prophet said to David immediately after his physical indulgence and murder. Yes, I have sinned, responds David. Here, he has pled to God for the life of his infant son, but when the death happens as God said it would, David immediately, with no words to anyone, washes, and worships God—and gets on with his business as military leader and ruler of the people.

Instance 3: David Sins; Joab Confronts (II, 19:1–8)

(A) DAVID’S SINNING. From a youthful David on the run (last part of I Samuel) we have come to a king in full power; a king fleeing a traitorous son whom the father has not disciplined; a king returning to power only to hear that this son, Absalom, has died at the hand of the father’s own forces.

Prior, Amnon has raped daughter Tamar. “When King David heard of all these things, he became very angry, but he would not punish his son Amnon, because he loved him, for he was his firstborn” (II, 13:21). In the case of Amnon, David does grievous wrong, with an apparently excessive love characterized by continued lack of discipline resulting in muddled thought and inaction. “After two full years” of the father’s doing nothing. Absalom murders his brother Amnon and goes into self-imposed exile. Three more years go by, with no word or action reported by the father regarding his murderous son, until, finally, we hear that “the heart of the king went out, yearning for Absalom” (II, 13:38–39). Bad goes to worse: eight years after the fratricide, Absalom takes bold initiative to reconnect with his father, who allows Absalom to see him but then dismisses

him with only a wordless kiss (II, 14:33). Four more years pass. Absalom turns traitorous, attempting to set himself up as king, which leads to his being slain in battle.

Hearing of his treasonous son's death, the father demonstrates the fruit of his excessive love for his sons. Hearing of Amnon's death was bad enough: "David mourned for his son day after day," that is, for an indefinite period of time (II, 13:37). David's mourning at news of Absalom's death is compressed: the "day after day" for Amnon becomes an excruciating minute after minute.

> The king was *deeply moved,* and went up to the chamber over the gate, and *wept;* and as he went, he said, "*O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom!* Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, *my son, my son!*" It was told Joab, "*The king is weeping* and *mourning* for Absalom." So the victory that day was turned into *mourning* for all the troops; for the troops heard that day, "The king is *grieving* for his son." The troops stole into the city that day as soldiers steal in who are ashamed when they flee in battle. The king covered his face, and the king *cried with a loud voice, "O my son Absalom, O Absalom, my son, my son!*" (II, 18:33–19:4, emphasis mine)

Even the staccato-like references to grieving are punctuated, interwoven, with expressions of deepest despair: *O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom.* Obsession: a familial focus run amuck to the extent that the king is out of control with grief, away from his public responsibilities between the gates—leading, in fact, to a sobbing that dispirits the troops. Seen from the perspective of the wider pattern, such response indicates something drastically wrong.

(B) DAVID CONFRONTED.

> Then Joab came into the house to the king, and said, "Today you have covered with shame the faces of all your officers who have saved your life today [fighting against Absalom's rebellious forces]. . . . You have made it clear today that commanders and officers are nothing to you; for I perceive that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased. So go out at once and speak kindly to your servants; for I swear by the Lord, if you do not go, not a man will stay with you this night; and this will be worse for you than any disaster that has come upon you from your youth until now." (II, 19:6–9)

How will David respond? Joab is a military commander whom David has found offensive in his rough-hewn ways. It is one thing to stop dead in one's dastardly

tracks at the vision of an intermediary as lovely as Abigail, a beauty whose wise words match her outward appearance. Still another to be captured by a tale well told by God's designated word-bearer, Nathan. But here is Joab, who on occasion has proved too ruthless and harsh for David to bear.[16] Presently, David has heard a rhetorical barrage:

- *"You have made it clear today that commanders and officers are nothing to you."*
- *"I perceive that if Absalom were alive and all of us were dead today, then you would be pleased."*
- *"I swear by the Lord, if you do not go [out to your troops], not a man will stay with you this night; and this will be worse for you than any disaster that has come upon you from your youth until now."*

Misreading here is understandable. However in the right Joab is, the audience might well be sympathetic toward David the distraught father.[17]

(C) DAVID'S RESPONSE. "The king got up and took his seat in the gate" (II, 19:8).

That quickly—the very next verse after Joab's no-nonsense confrontation: the narrator could not have been more deft in getting the point across.

David listens. A proper word from an improbable if not uncouth source—with not a narrative pause, no hesitation: communal well-being depends on the king who rules, and so it is. "The king got up and took his seat in the gate."

Such response, missed entirely or misunderstood without attention to the narrative's pattern of responses,[18] distinguishes David. What God has seen in David's heart becomes more and more clear. "The troops were all told, 'See, the king is sitting in the gate'; and all the troops came before the king" (II, 19:8). Joab had not suggested that David immediately resume his seat at the city gate, but David, on his own, has done so. This hint of David's finally taking initiative, along with the most unlikely intermediary prompting such initiative, prepares the audience for the last instance of wrongdoing, with a twist in the pattern of confrontation of David's wrongdoing that gets to the heart of who David is, and of who God is in deciding in what way David is a "better man" than Saul.

Theme 1* of the Chiasm: Conclusion

Instance 4, David Confronts Himself (II, chapter 24)

This last instance of David's wrongdoing is simultaneously the last instance of the chiastic conclusion and the conclusion of I and II Samuel as well (theme 1*). Within the chiastic pattern, we hear in David's sinning an echo of Saul's

wrongdoing, set up for us in the first theme of the chiasm (theme 1, chapter 21). Zealous, Saul broke faith with Israel's neighbors, bringing great harm to his people. The consequence of a three-year famine anticipates the horror of the three-day plague that results from David's paralleled sin.

(A) DAVID'S SINNING. Against the alarmed advice of Joab—a political realist, not a notably pious man—David nonetheless insists on risking taboo and national disaster by taking a census of Israel. What was so wrong? One possibility is simply the usurpation of God's reign, which is Klements' view: "What lies behind 2 Sam. 24 is the fact that the cultic rules for the carrying out of a census had not been observed. . . . [David must not act] autonomously with regard to the people who are Yahweh's possession. Even as king he remains subject to the one who is the real Sovereign."[19] Perhaps David wants to use the census to enlist troops and/or to assess tax. It is possible that taking a census involved conscripting males, which would enable a king to declare them troops; such a move might also have subjected the men to plagues resulting from their subsequent failures to keep the strict ritual purity of warriors that such conscription entailed. The text insists on the sinfulness of the act, but does not explain exactly what is so wrong about it. As measured by the toll exacted by the wrongdoing and by the concern of Joab—seventy thousand dead within Israel—the wrongdoing is extremely serious.

Furthermore, the enormity of the sin is indicated by a most peculiar narrative note: one dimension of the sin's origin is traced back to none other than God—which is so unthinkable as to be overlooked by otherwise astute readers.[20] So unthinkable, in fact, that a later biblical writer changes "God" to "Satan" (I Chron. 21:1).

The episode begins with something just as strange, and possibly bothersome to the story's audience. God is angry at the Israelites for something or other about which the text stays silent, and so it comes to be that God incites David to commit a sin—so that God can punish Israel! The ensuing sin of David allows God to lash out and destroy seventy thousand Israelites.

Here is God at a most questionable point of characterization, but the text refuses to allow the audience time or narrative space to worry about such matters. As I will show, there is very good rhetorical point, if viewed from within the pattern of David's wrongdoing, to what initially seems quite bizarre, and/or hopelessly random regarding the God-involvement. We are not told that David became aware of a supernatural force "making him do it." But within the narrative logic of the sequence, God's incitement and David's response turn out to be very significant, indeed. Here we reach the moral high point of the entire story.

(B, C) RESPONSE AND CONFRONTATION MERGED: DAVID CONFRONTED BY HIMSELF. David has committed a great wrongdoing. With no hesitation, and with no intermediary, David confronts himself. Before any untoward consequence or pronouncement of any sort, he becomes convinced of his wrongdoing. His response is immediate: he is "stricken to the heart" and approaches God: "I have sinned greatly in what I have done" (II, 24:10). And so the response follows so closely on the heels of confrontation as to be indistinguishable.

No one helps David come to his moral senses—and this, in spite of the fact that the audience knows, even if David does not, that God made him do it. No lovely Abigail cajoles David with gracious and godly words, no Nathan charms him with a melodramatic tale, no rough-hewn Joab admonishes him with straight talk. David confronts David. This twist of difference in the pattern, of course, turns out to be highly significant.

The disturbing note of God's incitement adds to the wonder that without anyone to confront him, the king confronts himself and confesses guilt before the God who spurred him to the sin in the first place, a most severe temptation irresistible, as it turns out, for David. At his worst, as measured by the consequence of seventy thousand dead, David is shown at his best. He has grown morally and in God-devotedness to this nearly unthinkable point of holding up a mirror to himself rather than someone else having to do it.

A good person doing well is no surprise; a great person doing heroic deeds provides no shock. But a powerfully good but sometimes dastardly king and completely pathetic father who rises to this kind of self-awareness, with no intermediary finger-pointing, is remarkable and the stuff of very high drama, beyond anything in ancient literature, including the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures.[21]

The accumulated echoes of the pattern build toward a narrative crescendo, a final burst of meaning. Not Nathan saying *You are the man,* but David telling God, directly: *I am the man.* "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. . . . I have done very foolishly" (II, 24:10). Twice he confesses, the second time on behalf of the people, as we will see: "I alone have sinned. . . . these sheep, what have they done? Let your hand, I pray, be against me and against my father's house (II, 24:17).

How far we are from what we saw in Saul. Not only is there none of Saul's equivocating response to wrongdoing, there is in David what is inconceivable for the Saul we meet early in his story: a radical willingness to look at himself critically, and further, to offer his own suffering on behalf of communal well-being. For David, an instantaneous *I have sinned greatly in what I have done* is followed by *punish me, not my people.*

(D) CONSEQUENCES. And so there must be consequences. But here, too, we find a twist in the pattern.

> When David rose in the morning, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, "Go and say to David: Thus says the Lord: Three things I offer you; choose one of them, and I will do it to you."
>
> So Gad came to David and told him; he asked him, "Shall three years of famine come to you on your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days' pestilence in your land? Now consider, and decide what answer I shall return to the one who sent me."
>
> Then David said to Gad, "I am in great distress; let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into human hands.
>
> So the Lord sent a pestilence on Israel from the that morning until the appointed time; and seventy thousand of the people died. (II, 24:11–15)

David must suffer consequences that are worse, in his view, than the former punishments falling on his own person. Now he must suffer for his people. He couldn't have chosen better, however, with perhaps a bit of flattery or cajoling of the divine: *let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great.*[22]

During the disastrous plague against his people, David once again approaches God: *punish me, not my people* (II, 24:17). How unusual. God responds to the request in an equally unusual way: David is directed by the Lord to erect an altar (II, 24:19), which accomplished what David has most desired, relief for his people. "David built there an altar to the Lord, and offered burnt offerings and offerings of well-being. so the Lord answered his supplication for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel" (II, 24:25). This is the last verse of II Samuel.

In all, a most extraordinary story, particularly if viewed within the two relevant patterns: the chiastic conclusion, and here theme 1*, and, for David, the pattern of sin-confrontation-response-consequence. These two instances of different patterns dove-tail in a conclusion up to the task of being conclusive.

To miss pattern details such as we have seen is to miss or distort much of the story.[23] In lieu of listening with the expertise of the original audience, we need to exercise attention to how this ancient story embeds its meaning, so that we can uncover its implicit moral vision. And so it is that we are led to a

stretching of our world of vision by way of entry into another, a narrative viewing of a world invariably unlike, or not quite like, our own.

Conclusion

In the context of the foregoing exploration of the framing themes (1 and 1*) of the chiastic conclusion and the pattern of David's sinning, we can better assess David's claim (at the chiasm's center point—II, 22) that he is "blameless," which I have suggested is crucial for understanding the heart of David, which in turn sheds light on God's heart that delighted in David.

Seen as humans see, "look[ing] on the outward appearance" (I, 16:7), David is far from blameless; his claim "I kept myself from guilt," seems ludicrous (II, 22:24). *Seems.* But we have been told from early on that this story's God sees beyond, beneath, appearances.

Something in David pleases the divine heart, and that something is revealed within the pattern of David's wrongdoings: ready recognition of them, and repentance—most notably in the concluding episode of II Samuel in which he admits to his wrongdoing with no assistance from an intermediary and in spite of the fact that God has prompted the sin. But still: what can *blameless* mean? The text does not flinch, nor does it gloss. The audience is now at the heart of mystery of who David is.

Let us add to our exploration of the prior chapter, where the statement occurs in the heart of a long concluding pair of poems by David.

"I have been blameless / "I kept myself from guilt" (22:24). In another translation we hear "I had been faultless towards him, / I had carefully avoided guilt."[24] Without fault? Avoided guilt? After the Bathsheba-Uriah fiasco, we recall that "David said to Nathan, 'I have sinned against the Lord.' " Nathan responded with the operative words in this matter of David's blamelessness, his being without guilt: "Now the Lord has put away your sin; you shall not die" (II, 12:13). *Put away your sin:* put it where? Away. Mortals see, mortals remember. This story's God puts it away, *if.* . . . Confronted, David is always in the habit of confessing and repenting—turning around (the Abigail and Joab stories come especially to mind). For such, God puts sin away—though not its consequence; David is revealed as someone seen by God as being without blame, a person without guilt on his hands.

In the light of the last instance in the pattern of David's wrongdoing, theme 1* of the chiasm, blamelessness would appear to reach its perfection in the ability to confront oneself and then offer the results to God—who, in this story, has the capacity and willingness to put the sin away, as the prophet said.

David's assertion of blamelessness echoes a crucial motif from other narratives in the Hebrew Scriptures in which others are either viewed as blameless or encouraged to be so.[25]

Some see David's claim of blamelessness so incongruous in light of the whole story as to suggest an obvious and quite awkward gloss by a writer supporting royal ideology with an eye blind to David's abuses of royal prerogative, to his wrongdoing.[26] But David's claim is a *tamim* that is defined as being completely tuned to, and dependent on, God. This state of *tamim,* of being without fault, is not only the condition of having had his sin put away by God, but an orientation of David to God that is completely loyal. Proper response to wrongdoing—penitence and steadfast loyalty—moves God to put away the penitent's wrongdoing, together with the incurred guilt. That is, all is in order between David and God.[27]

What God sees at the beginning of the story about David that recommends him as a man after God's own heart is what the audience sees on full display by the end of the story, in the last instance not only of the chiastic ending but of his pattern of wrongdoing as well. Here is a story whose primary dramatic interests have been the related questions *Who is David?* and *What is God thinking in choosing David over Saul?* Both questions are largely being answered throughout the story, and especially here in a chiastic resolution that adds an exclamation point to the consistent literary genius and developing moral vision of the entire narrative.[28] To miss the interlocking patterns of the chiastic conclusion is to miss the genius of this conclusion in reflecting the story as a whole.[29] What God has seen in David that pleases the divine heart is on full display in a human partner who is committed to justice (II, 8:15) and to fearless, self-scrutinizing confession.[30]

Both levels of causation, divine and human, are resolved in the end: God stops the devastation of Israel, David prays that it stop; furthermore, God demands an altar to be built, David must do so, offering sacrifices—and the plague is "averted" as we heard as the last verse in the Book of Samuel. The simultaneity of divine-human effort is suggested by the strange narrative ordering, insofar as God's stopping the destruction occurs before David prays to God for such cessation (II, 24:16–17). Such relationally shared responsibility may be part of the mystery of God's inciting David to sin and David's subsequent sinning—for which David takes ownership, repenting without anyone confronting him and before any punishment has been meted out (II, 24:9–12).

The narrative scene at the end of The Book of Samuel is stark: only God and David are present. The story of Samuel winds down with the divine and human leader working out troublesome matters together. At stake, of

course, is the communal well-being of Israel, who, off in the distance, suffer greatly. The concluding line of Samuel highlights the altar, the future site of the ark, and the focus on divine-human leadership of Israel, as we have seen: "David built there [on the threshing floor of an alien][31] an altar to the Lord, and offered burnt offerings and sacrifices of well-being. So the Lord answered his supplication for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel" (II, 24:25).

How far from the corresponding episode with which we began this chapter, Saul's overly-zealous breaking of a peace treaty, bringing his people a plague he can do—or does—nothing about. David must resolve the crisis. Saul is a divine choice of king that didn't work, but God's second try reigns for his entire life—in such a way, as we have seen, to finally have pleased God very much.

The first ark episode in the last three chapters of Judges served as a preamble to the establishment of monarchy in Israel (chapter 5). Here at the end of Samuel, we have the monarch of Israel repenting, then negotiating and pleading with the divine monarch. In that first episode, the ark and altar appeared narratively in the midst of the discombobulated Israelites, to no good effect; here, in the last episode of Samuel, the narrative attention is on the altar, which plays a key role in the resolution to communal ill. The devastation of Israel itself is off at a distance, as mentioned, seen by the angel and David from the perspective of a Jebusite enclave. Yet the community is restored to well-being by the end, through the joint agencies of God, the initiator and sometime respondent, and David, the respondent and sometime initiator. The dramatic focus has zoomed in on the two key players, and on the altar. The ark will have to wait for its new home, the Temple, on this very spot.[32] But the special quality of relationship between God and David shown in this story is not its own end, but rather is supportive of that one fixed thing that does not change with God, that to which God's steadfast love is forever loyal: the communal well-being of Israel, and—for an audience alert to a key echoing of Genesis—the purpose of that well-being, the blessing of all peoples (Gen. 12:3).[33]

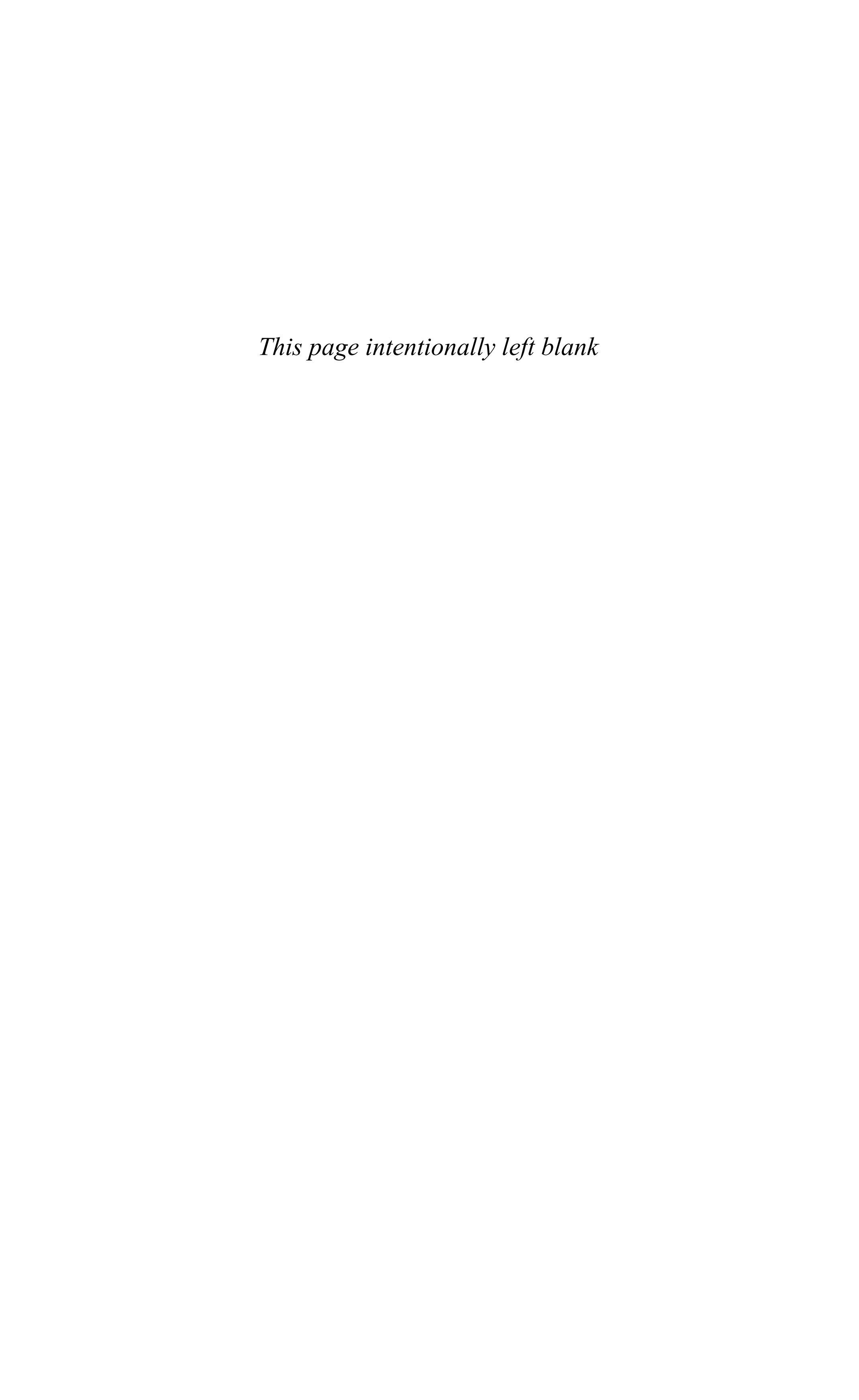
Contrary to any view of God's unilateral rule,[34] this story of David demonstrates a covenantal harmony requires nothing less than, and begins with, the working out between God and the ruler of God's people Israel the most vexing of human difficulties toward realistic promise and realization.[35]

The story of David leaves us with a sense of a mystery man whose extraordinary complexities and contradictions cohere in a unified consciousness—a single, believable person—whose depths forever beg for review, exploration, and answers. It is the

Pattern Eleven: David's Wrongdoing

	Instance #1 (I, 25)	Instance #2 (II, 11–12:25)	Instance #3 (II, 13–19:8)	Instance #4 (II, 24)	Instance #5 (I Kings 1)
THE WRONG	Intends murderous vindication (with vulgar oath) against Nabal and his men.	Adultery with Bathsheba; has her husband (Uriah) killed.	Had not dealt with his son Absalom's fratricide.	Takes a census (troop conscript? assessing power in peace-time?).	Adonijah's father "had never at any time displeased him by asking, 'Why have you done thus and so?'".
CONFRONTED RESPONSE (DAVID'S)	Abigail; David immediately turns around.	Nathan; David immediately confesses.	Joab; David immediately turns around: takes seat at town gate.	David himself immediately, confesses to God.	Bathsheba and Nathan immediately turns around (has Solomon anointed King).
RESPONSE (GOD'S)	strikes foolish Nabal dead; Abigail available as David's wife.	* forgives * strikes infant son dead * "sword shall never depart from your house."		* forgives (implicit) * three-day plague: 70,000 Israelites die.	God honors David, implicitly: Kingdom prospers (for a while).

nature of this narrative representation, so different from that of the heroes of the Homeric epics, and so very modern, that I wish to examine in my conclusion. Here I will review, too, what this study has discovered about the God of David's story. The respective worlds of storytelling couldn't be more different, nor the implicit moral visions more interestingly contrasted.



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Conclusion

David and God, Odysseus and Athene: Character and Moral Universe

Then resourceful Odysseus spoke in turn and answered [Alkinoos]. . . . "I am Odysseus son of Laertes, known before all men for the study of crafty designs, and my fame goes up to the heavens." (IX:lines 1; 19–20)

—Lattimore, *The Odyssey of Homer*

Then King David went in and sat before the Lord, and said, "Who am I, O Lord God, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?" (II, 7:18)

That David would never, could never, speak the foregoing lines of Odysseus is as true as the corollary, that David's lines are inconceivable on the lips of Homer's Odysseus. For the story's audience, the resourceful Odysseus—*known before all men for the study of crafty designs*—is always the same, on brilliant display, whereas David is presented as mysterious, acting unpredictably with motives that are often hidden. I want to use a perspective outside David's story in order to shed another angle of light on the dynamic among David, Saul, and God. By way of a telling and apt contrast with Homer's vision of the relationship between Odysseus and the goddess Athene,[1] I will bring the biblical David, God, and their mutually dependent relationship into a different sort of focus than the preceding analysis was able to afford.

In his well-know *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature,* Erich Auerbach suggests that the story of Abraham (David's story is even more to his point) provides a sense of the "unexpected and mysterious," a felt "progress through the indeterminate and the contingent, a holding of the breath."[2] The Homeric story, he thinks, is "clearly outlined, brightly and uniformly illuminated"—a world in which we view "simply the quiet existence and operation of things in accordance with their natures."[3] The biblical writer develops character, while the Homeric writer demonstrates character.

Odysseus and David were undoubtedly popular heroes, respectively, of ancient Greek and Hebrew cultures. Their stories are roughly contemporaneous in composition—somewhere in the early part of the first millennium BCE.

What emerges from such a juxtaposition of respective episodes from each story is a fundamental difference not just in conceptions of character but also in views of a moral universe, highlighting a view of David that helps answer our fundamental questions: *Who is David—and how does David's God think?*

What is similar in each story is a sustained focus on very great heroes. The popular hero of any long story, as Odysseus and David surely were, tells us much about the kind of world—its values and perspectives—from which the story arose. In determining the differences of the heroes we discern not only two distinct cultures, but discrete kinds of storytelling. That Homer's work is in verse, for example, indicates a constriction of possibility in characterization and action: a tendency toward static character and predictable action. Narrative prose, on the other hand, is more capable of a fluidity and nuance in portraying characters who undergo change in contexts of action that takes unexpected turns. We not only come to better clarity about the kind of character David is through this comparative exercise, but to a better understanding of fundamentally different modes of storytelling that are consonant with radically different characterization and views of divine and mortal worlds.

We turn to a fortuitous similarity of episodes from the respective stories, dramatic high points of their respective stories:. David and Odysseus find themselves in caves. Death is in the air. Odysseus's cave scene reinforces and embellishes what we have known about him from the very beginning. David's cave scene reveals something very new about him, even while more questions are raised.

Odysseus enters a cave out of curiosity. David is forced into a cave, fleeing and presumably fearing for his life. Odysseus wants to explore the cave, and does so against the advice of his men. Odysseus seeks adventure, partially to make his name better known. David has never had, and never will have, the luxury of seeking out adventure—with the exception of an adulterous liaison.

David makes his way into the cave to save his men and himself from the murderous and close-at-hand Saul.

Odysseus, the Cave, and the World of That Cave

Odysseus has endured many adventures—misadventures, more properly—on his way home to Ithaka, after the ten-year Trojan war. He will suffer more challenges once arriving home in Ithaka. The singer-narrator of this epic begins by begging the Muse to assist in recounting the story

> of the man of many ways, who was driven
> far journeys, after he had sacked Troy's sacred citadel.
> Many were they whose cities he saw, whose minds he learned of,
> many the pains he suffered in his spirit on the wide sea,
> struggling for his own life and the homecoming of his companions.
> (1:1–5)

"Man of many ways" is epithet-like, a synonym for "man of many devices" (or "man of many turns"): *curious, crafty, foresighted, resourceful.*

After suffering many adventures and misadventures—always indomitably resourceful—Odysseus lands on an island of enlightened mortals. It is his last stop before arriving home, after twenty years away, ten for the Trojan War and ten for the arduous traveling back home. At this point Homer's narrator relinquishes duty in favor of letting Odysseus go on and on recounting his glorious escapes to the eager ears of his hosts. Here it is that we learn of the cave encounter. Odysseus plays the great bard, charming his audience with tales of his fantastic adventures and famous self. Those enthralled are the most civilized and perfected of humankind, the Phaiakians. After recounting two short adventures out of many—these episodes mostly come in threes—we get to a climactic tale, the cave episode.

Odysseus consistently offers a view of himself that confirms for the audience of *The Odyssey* that the protagonist's self-understanding is complete: here, his many ways of suffering accord with the narrator's estimate in the epic's first lines: "man of many ways, of many turns."

Pointing out his own glorious resourcefulness, Odysseus acknowledges culpability for getting his men into the cave dilemma. Even in the confession, however, there is an implicit pride of a superior spirit and capacity.

> From the start my companions spoke to me and begged me
> to take some of the cheeses [from the cave], come back again, and
> the next time

> to drive the lambs and kids from their pens, and get back quickly
> to the ship again, and go sailing off across the salt water;
> but I would not listen to them, it would have been better their way,
> not until I could see him, see if he would give me presents. (IX, lines 224–229)

Homer has Odysseus explain his motivation in such a way as to excuse the more unfortunate aspects of his curiosity. As he approaches the Cyclops's habitation, he explains his driven-ness to the men:

> The rest of you, who are my eager companions, wait here,
> while I, with my own ship and companions that are in it,
> go and find out about these people, and learn what they are,
> whether they are savage and violent, and without justice,
> or hospitable to strangers and with minds that are godly. (IX, lines 172–176)

Odysseus is dedicated to the domestic, to getting home, but at the same time he is not adverse to adventurous forays and detours.

In short order, Odysseus and his men are secured in the cave by the huge one-eyed Polyphemos, who has returned home, lodging a huge rock in the cave's mouth. This is a boulder not able to be moved by twenty-two strong wagons. The ungainly giant speaks—

> and the inward heart in us was broken
> in terror of the deep voice and for seeing him so monstrous;
> but even so I had words for an answer. (IX, lines 256–258)

Of course the ever-resourceful Odysseus has "words for an answer." But Polyphemos is not impressed with his guest's tale of high winds and shipwreck, or even by Odysseus's appeal to "Zeus the guest god who stands behind all strangers with honors / due them, avenges any wrong toward strangers and supplicants" (9:270–271). Polyphemos snorts, then acts:

> [he] sprang up and reached for my companions,
> caught up two together and slapped them, like killing puppies,
> against the ground, and the brains ran all over the floor, soaking
> the ground. Then he cut them up limb by limb and got supper ready,
> and like a lion reared in the hills, without leaving anything,
> ate them, entrails, flesh, and the marrowy bones alike. (IX, lines 288–293)

An additional two men suffer the same fate. This mess of Odysseus's own making allows him to boast of his resourcefulness, the capacity to stand apart from instinctual response in consideration of options. "Then I took counsel with myself in my great-hearted spirit," he tells his Phaiakian hosts, determining to kill the giant on the spot. But, ever-wise, he thinks again: the rock sealing the cave would be impervious to any attempt to dislodge it.

> But the second thought stayed me;
> for there we too would have perished away in sheer destruction,
> seeing that our hands could never have pushed from the lofty
> gate of the cave the ponderous boulder he had propped there. (IX, lines 302–305)

Polyphemos asks Odysseus his name, affording the storyteller one the great moments of Odysseus's forethought.

> Cyclops, you ask me for my famous name. I will tell you
> then, but you must give me a guest gift as you have promised.
> *Nobody* is my name. My father and mother call me
> *Nobody,* as do all the others who are my companions. (IX, lies 364–367)

That night, Odysseus gets the giant drunk. Placing the end of a great beam in "a deep bed of cinders," Odysseus gets the point red-hot and then, with his men, rams it into the Cylops's single eye, blinding him. Polyphemos bellows in pain, howling so loud as to be heard through the cave walls to the distant and isolated habitations of his fellow Cyclopes. They rush to the scene, outside the cave.

> "Why, Polyphemos, what do you want with all this outcry
> through the immortal night and have made us all thus sleepless?
> Surely no mortal against your will can be driving your sheep off?
> Surely none can be killing you by force or treachery?"
> Then from inside the cave strong Polyphemos answered:
> "Good friends, Nobody is killing me by force or treachery."
> So then the others speaking in winged words gave him an answer:
> "If alone as you are none uses violence on you,
> why, there is no avoiding the sickness sent by great Zeus;
> so you had better pray to your father, the lord Poseidon."
> So they spoke as they went away, and the heart within me
> laughed over how my name and my perfect planning had fooled him. (IX, lines 403–414)

Here is great melodrama: by epic's end we find the triumph of good over evil, as expected; more especially, we are assured that in this life it's always brains over brawn, crafty design over lumbering viciousness.

Odysseus's "Nobody" can also mean "Crafty." Homer's wordplay on "nobody"/ "crafty one" is exquisite: the story's narrator does well in letting the bard Odysseus speak on his own behalf!, Here is a cleverness never understood by the lumbering Polyphemos; in effect, Odysseus is taunting the fool with wordplay, adding insult to most grievous injury.[4]

Our hero's brilliant plan of escape now enters its final stage. Polyphemos will have to move the great boulder to let his sheep out in the morning. The Phaiakians, we have been told, are rapt listeners, Odysseus goes on in his tale to point out that "combining all my resources and treacheries," he has figured out a plan of escape. He ties each of his men to the underside of three sheep lashed together. Blinded Polyphemos can only sit by the door with his groping hands, checking for any human escapees as the herd leaves the cave. The sheep slip out, men undetected. Odysseus himself is the last to leave, hanging on beneath the largest ram (IX, lines 422). Polyphemos, his one eye gouged out, does not check his flock's underbellies.

The story's celebration of such heroics is capped by an astonishing report by our hero of his own departing braggadocio. Putting his ships at great risk from the boulder-heaving Polyphemos, Odysseus shouts up toward the cliff on which the giant stands, in effect *I am NOT Nobody!* or *I am craftiness itself!*

> Cyclops, in the end it was no weak man's companions
> you were to eat by violence and force in your hollow
> cave. (IX, lines 475–477)

Oh no, great monster. Don't think for minute that this was some sort of "weak man."

> Cyclops, if any mortal man ever asks you who it was
> that inflicted upon your eye this shameful blinding,
> tell him that you were blinded by Odysseus, sacker
> of cities. (IX, lines 502–504)

His men have urged their leader not to put them in danger with such provocative boasting, which indeed jeopardizes their lives, "but [they] could not persuade the great heart in me" (9:500). *I am not nobody. No weak man am I. Consider me, craftiness embodied.* Astonishing, the degree of derring-do in satisfying this urge to be known, to be recognized as the great one: astonishing, but not really surprising, because precisely such heroic behavior and attitude are expected throughout the entire epic. What is delightfully astonishing is that

which is hard to imagine beforehand, the brilliant playing-out of such wit and courage, their outrageousness of expression.

Polyphemos is enraged, and his father, the god Poseidon, is enraged. Poseidon's angry vindictiveness will come to haunt Odysseus, and his listening hosts as well. But it all makes for a great story, every bit of it serving to add to Odysseus's fame that, as we have seen earlier, reaches the heavens.

In such a world of hero and heroics, "clearly outlined, brightly and uniformly illuminated" as Auerbach suggests, there is a sense of uncomplicated time, however filled with marvelous adventure and even suffering. Here is spectacle more than drama, a distanced view of Odysseus, his world, and his goddess, Athene—a freedom of time and space in which the hero can explore and escape, get caught in god-inspired catastrophe and escape again, explore and escape some more. And then spend long evenings telling stories about it all, and then get home. Homer's audience knows that larger story, that surely the hero will get home. The hero's moral world, his reputation, and the story's action itself are all fixed entities; the audience experiences the luxury of viewing "the operation of things in accordance with their natures"—again, Auerbach—with great dashes of bravado and derring-do.

David, the Cave, and the World of That Cave

David and his men enter a cave out of duress, as already pointed out, while Odysseus explores a cave he knows is dangerous for the adventure of it—sacrificing the life of four men. Fleeing Saul and his numerous troops, David and his small band of men have retreated to the back of the very cave subsequently used by the king for purposes of defecation. Saul squats in a most vulnerable state. "[T]he men of David said to him, 'Here is the day of which the Lord said to you, *I will give your enemy into your hand, and you shall do to him as it seems good to you.*' " With no narrative pause, we hear that "David went and stealthily cut off a corner of Saul's cloak"; he returns to his men (I, 24:2).

Before the men have a chance to say anything, we have stern words of the leader to his men. All is so surprising, with our hero himself experiencing great remorse about even the cutting off of the corner of the king's cloak, an action that his men would think, at the very least, inappropriately considerate to Saul. David inhabits a moral world—and a political world—quite different from that of his men, and quite different from that of Odysseus and *The Odyssey*. David explains:

> He said to his men, "The Lord forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the Lord's anointed, to raise my hand against him; for he is the Lord's anointed."

> So David scolded his men severely and did not permit them to attack Saul. Then Saul got up and left the cave, and went on his way. (I, 24:5–7)

The taunting and boasting of the heroic Odysseus on his departure from the Cyclops's cave contrasts sharply with David's being stricken in his heart after the robe cutting. Qualitatively different from anything in *The Odyssey,* also, are the words David utters to his spared pursuer, after each has departed the cave:

"David also rose up and went out of the cave and called after Saul, 'My lord the king!' When Saul looked behind him, David bowed with his face to the ground, and did obeisance" (I, 24:8). Saul is on his way, and David stops him: the king must look behind him on hearing David's voice.

> David said to Saul, "Why do you listen to the words of those who say, 'David seeks to do you harm'? This very day your eyes have seen how the Lord gave you into my hand in the cave; and some urged me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, 'I will not raise my hand against my lord; for he is the Lord's anointed.' See, my father, see the corner of your cloak in my hand; for by the fact that I cut off the corner of your cloak, and did not kill you, you may know for certain that there is no wrong or treason in my hands. I have not sinned against you, though you are hunting me to take my life. May the Lord judge between me and you! May the Lord avenge me on you; but my hand shall not be against you. As the ancient proverb says, 'Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness'; but my hand shall not be against you." (I, 24:8–13)

Saul is deeply moved. " 'Is this your voice, my son David?' Saul lifted up his voice and wept" (I, 24:16).

The king goes on to explain his surprise, his weeping astonishment: "You are more righteous than I; for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil. . . . For who has ever found an enemy, and sent the enemy safely away?" (I, 24:17–19)

David may expect to become king, "the Lord's anointed," so our hero's actions can be considered politically circumspect. But, as Saul confesses, David's behavior is, in moral terms, astonishing. However politically motivated, David's action appears morally motivated as well, carrying as it does such high risk, both from Saul (who will continue to hunt David down) and from David's own men.

With *The Odyssey,* no such surprise at the level of morality comes to mind. Odysseus found a mortal enemy in Polyphemos, wisely refraining from slaying

him only because Odysseus and his men would have died in the bouldered cave with a dead giant rotting beside them. The Homeric hero does his craftiest best in blinding Polyphemos and, departing the cave, accomplishes the utmost comeuppance by making sure the Cyclops knows the he, *Nobody,* is *Somebody* and then some. Politically foresighted and morally splendid, David offers Saul—a more formidable and relentless enemy than any Cyclops could be—a most unthinkable restraint, as expressed from the enemy himself: *Who has ever found an enemy, and sent the enemy safely away?*

Triads of Adventures Compared: More on Character, Story Shape, and Implicit Moral Vision

Both cave scenes occur in a triad of related adventures that helps to strengthen the contrast between the stories' respective characters, manners of storytelling, and implicit moral visions.

For *The Odyssey,* such triadic patterns of repetition are common, helping to demonstrate the epic's similarity of adventure and constancy of portrait. For the biblical writer, the cave scene is one of three stories of sparing the enemy that could hardly be more different from each other—including the portrayals of different Davids. As we have seen (chapter 4), the pattern of these three episodes constitutes one of many different forms of pattern in David's story, and is, in itself, a pattern of much greater contrasts and complexity than exhibited by the series of triadic adventures in *The Odyssey*. Again, the point is that the story shapes determine and are determined by—are of a piece with—the represented characters, action, and implicit moral visions.

In fact, the complexity of character and action in the biblical narrative requires a more sophisticated array of storytelling techniques—however polished and fine Homer's epics are, accomplishments that deservedly rank Homer very high among ancient writers. But Homer is working on something like a two-dimensional tapestry, beautifully: geometric chiastic patterns abound, along with the marvelous poetry. Pursuing the analogy, the biblical writer, in the case of David at least, is dealing with a world seen in three dimensions, as I hope this entire study has shown.

Odysseus's Cave Episode as One of Three—and Other Triadic Repetitions: More and Better of the Same

The cave scene in Book IX of *The Odyssey* concludes, in grand fashion, a triad of adventure scenes, all sharing the similar ingredients of mayhem and sterling response by Odysseus. In the first episode of the triad—just a few

brief lines (IX, lines 39–61)—we find the wind driving the ships of Odysseus and his men to the shores of the Kikonians. Unprovoked, Odysseus, "sacker of cities" (a companion epithet to "resourceful") decimates the city, killing the men and dividing up the women and plunder among his own men. But his men disobey Odysseus, loitering on the island. Some remaining Kikonians have time to engage in battle. Six men from each of Odysseus's ships are killed before the hero and his remaining men can escape. Then, in the second of three episodes, equally brief in its telling (62–104), wind and tide carry the ships off course to the land of the Lotus-Eaters. The islanders' diet entices, depriving Odysseus's men of all ambition, including that of getting home. The ever-resourceful Odysseus captures his men, strapping them on board the ships. Once again, they set sail—as always, for home. They then arrive at the land of the Cyclopes, known to be lawless and ruthless. The two prior adventures function to set the dramatic stage for the lengthiest adventure by far—the cave scene, a grand finale.

This triadic pattern of escapades continues in books X, XII and XIII. In each of the four books we find a serial progression: two brief adventures lead up to an extended and climactic tale. All four triads focus on the adventure and resourcefulness of Odysseus; his men, as foil, are demonstrably inferior. In these triadic scenes, as elsewhere, there is no interest in Odysseus's change in self-awareness or moral perspicacity. Odysseus admits making mistakes, and then makes similar mistakes again: going into the Cyclops's cave, for example; taunting Polyphemus, son of a god, when leaving; delaying his trip home for one year s for the pleasure of becoming the lover of the beautiful magician-goddess Circe—a rousing good tale, the third and last of Book X. What the triadic structure emphasizes, of course, is the resourcefulness of the hero—always more and better of the same.

Any mistakes are easily remedied by simply moving on. Meanwhile, such mistakes serve to showcase Odysseus's considerable curiosity, wit, and pluck. No apologies are needed, or offered. What dominates in each of these triadic adventures is Odysseus on display, the hero *known before all men for the study of crafty designs.*

Another way the triadic structure emphasizes fixity, certainty of character, can be seen later in the epic, with Odysseus having just returned home to wise, patient Penelope (always wise, always patient). This is in Book XVII, where the first and third frames involve Penelope inquiring after her husband. At the heart of this mini-chiasm, the centerpiece is Odysseus—"visually in the door of his palace as he enters it," as Stephen Tracy notes. Tracy goes on to describe well the storytelling effect:

> Penelope's fixed position in the palace has been established from the opening book. Indeed, she and the palace have become one for the audience and for Odysseus, at once a goal and a symbol of the steadfast quality of the house and their union. Her presence in the narrative at this point framing his return, just as the poet frames him visually in the door of his palace as he enters it (339–341), is very satisfying. Artistically, we have here a variation on the type of a picture contained within a picture.[5]

The hero is at the fixed center, framed by faithful Penelope's concern and fixed in place by the palace door itself. It all is something like portraits in a slide show–type drama. The particular slide with Odysseus framed by the palace door is absolutely no surprise and very satisfying for its not being so, for its being expected, predictable, and finally achieved reality. All the better that the picture is framed by Penelope demonstrating her faithful pursuit of the lost husband.

All that remains, now, is that Penelope have her day, the centerpiece of a framed husband: she, the patient and wise Penelope, who for ten years has done her resourceful best to stave off the suitors in her hope of her heroic husband's return. And so it is, in the triadic structure of Book XVIII, as Tracy points out:

> The next book, by almost a mirror technique, features Penelope at the center of a tripartite structure as she appears before the suitors and beguiles gifts from them (18.158–303). Just as she tricks the suitors, so on each side of her we now see Odysseus besting the suitors and their minions. (1–157, 304–428)[6]

The chiastic triad of Books XVII and XVIII are perfect for portraiture. While the earlier triadic structures, initiated with the cave scene in Book IX, have a great deal more action, the rhetorical effect of Books XVII and XVIII is that of portraiture, of hero and heroine known and enhanced by action that add up to epithet.

To have characters who themselves undergo significant change, maybe even transformation, is a foreign possibility here, given the structure and implicit vision of Homer's story, his particular epic genre. The shape of *The Odyssey* speaks forth its implicit moral vision: there can only be return to an expected greatness of fortune, or an apotheosis of a glorious life in a glorious death—either of the two destinies deserved and experienced by heroes who can only add to their fixed, epithet-like greatness. The gods and goddesses

look on, assisting their mortal protégés in the sameness of their character and expected destiny.

A world of uncertain future and unpredictable character, true of David's story, while missing from Homer's, does not of course deny to *The Odyssey* a particular and great pleasure, that of spectacle, portraiture, and destiny. Odysseus and Achilles are heroes whose character is clear from the start, and whose actions and responses are almost always predictable. In terms of genuine surprise, there is no sense of *what next?*[7] "As opposed to Homer who tells us everything," James Ackerman notes, "the art of biblical narrative challenges us with what we are not told but must attempt to discern."[8] The shape of David's story, indeed, is just that way because its representation of character and time itself is just that way: difficult to discern, to predict.

There is suspense in Homer's epics, undoubtedly, and the retelling and retelling would presumably elicit, over and over, great pleasure. The suspense in David's story, however, is of a different nature—even though, like the epics, the story would have been repeated and repeated to the same audience. But here the suspense, rehearsed, exhibits a qualitative difference, a difference in kind: what will David do next? How will the story's God respond? Come again—what was it that made God change the divine mind about Saul? The story's audience, as Meir Sternberg notes in his book's subtitle, must be engaged in "The Drama of Reading."

> The [biblical] narrator . . . will shun extended commentary, let alone homiletics. He will not schematize character, whatever the risk involved in marring the image of the hero or eliciting sympathy for the villainous or the doomed. He will leave gaps for the reader to puzzle over—non sequiturs, discontinuities, indeterminacies, multiple versions—while fully aware of their disordering effect on the shape and lessons of the past. He will conceal and distribute and process meaning to an extent seldom equaled even by storytellers who could please themselves. None of these "incongruous" choices was forced, few inherited from neighboring cultures. Rather, most were invented and elaborated in the Israelite tradition of narrative, so that the whole strategy cannot have been less than deliberate.[9]

The demand on the hearer to figure things out, along with this sense of the uncertainty of "what's next," indicates for David's story a view of unfolding historical reality—very messy—that appears fundamentally opposed to the Homeric conception of character and time. Ian Watt, tracing "the rise of the novel" in his book by that title, speaks about the "timeless and unchanging" bases of ancient Greek literature: "Nothing happened or could happen whose

fundamental meaning was not independent of the flux of time." Watt's view of these polarities may be too categorical, but clearly much of the traditional novel and most biblical narratives reflect a sense of time that is fundamentally different from that represented in the epics of Homer.[10] Time is essentially closed in Homer's world, closed to genuinely new possibility in the world of action, of morality, of character. The shape of Homer's epic, relying on patterns of repetition that merely repeat—albeit very interestingly, and with embellishment, determines and is determined by a conception of fixed character and the given-ness of action and a moral world in which choice affecting community for the good is limited.

David and the Three Sparings: Twist and Transformation

David's twice sparing the king's life, morally and politically commendable, constitutes a frame that features a centerpiece episode representing David at his worst: he barely escapes his own interior darkness. At the eleventh hour, he is talked into sparing the life of a fool, and so himself is spared from his own worst motivations. And the second sparing of Saul is utterly different from the first in dramatic tension and resolution. Rather than fleeing from Saul into a cave, as in the first instance, in the parallel instance, David pursues his pursuer Saul in order to make a point of sparing the king, once again. These three sparings demonstrate a great range of emotion and moral possibilities, each unpredictable—the dramatic stuff of discovery.

The first episode offers surprise at levels of character, action, and implicit moral universe. The second episode complicates the element of surprise, of character depth and complexity, insofar as we witness the hero's capacity for foulness of mouth and vindictiveness of action—but also his extraordinary willingness to listen, repent, and turn back.

The contrast between the first and second episodes is accentuated by details linking the two stories. A vulgar, oath-taking David intends, in the second episode, to spear all of those who piss against the wall, recalling the potential victim, Saul, defecating.[11] In the second episode, a woman helps David contain his own worst instincts,[12] whereas in the prior episode David curbs his men's worst instincts. The second instance of sparing an enemy is fairy tale–like: very bad guy is turned wonderfully good by the lovely and intelligent wife of a boor, and then, by convenient circumstance, almost immediately gets to marry her. The dramatic tensions of the prior sparing of the King relieving himself in the cave, on the other hand, are sobering, with a commensurate serious resolution, both at the level of action and of the moral universe. Such a whirligig of character revelations for the hero, as just this one

triad of episodes shows, is a study in contrast with the Homeric triad of adventures just outlined.

The third episode here in David story, the parallel sparing of King Saul, is entirely different in dramatic tone and in the characterization of David—though we recognize him as the same David of the first and second episodes. Here David takes initiative and risks own his life in order to . . . do what? For what purpose does David, accompanied by a single accomplice, proceed through enemy lines toward King Saul? David and Abishai stand by the sleeping Saul, "his spear stuck in the ground beside his head" (I, 26:27). How obvious, simple, clear! There's a spear, and there's the enemy's head. Abishai advocates the obvious: kill Saul. David responds, in stronger terms, that avoidance of such killing is of the essence.[13]

After lecturing his own champion Abishai, David turns his attention not to Saul, but to Saul's commander and troops: their carelessness in exposing the king to danger is inexcusable. A didactic tone replaces the more dramatic tension of the cave scene, as if the narrator—just as David, within the story—wishes to make sure that no one misses the point. Compare the earlier tone, in the cave scene. Such tense drama allows for the potential of incongruities and comic relief: Saul squatting, David crawling—two who have been the objects of each other's tension-fraught focus, Saul trying to kill David, David trying not to be killed. And at the other end of the emotional spectrum, David's strickenness of heart and his men's need of restraint. And here's Saul weeping at the words of his nemesis David. In the parallel account, later, there is no weeping, no possibility of laughter, no real tension. David is now in control, polished rhetoric and all, as opposed to David caught in the cave.

In the first episode, David expressed to Saul a defense of his actions; in the echoing scene, the third episode, David's speech is more declaration than defense.

In the latter adventure, it's as if David, with God's help (Saul, commander, and troops remain asleep) is staging a morality play. He is purely political, waking up the troops of Saul to lecture them, these troops who one day will be his own. David appears utterly pious, devoted to God, but also supremely political.

In the first sparing scene, David is represented as a character who seems to be discovering good morality, whereas in the follow-up instance with Saul, David appears determined to display an already-achieved morality of the highest order.

In this triad of sparing episodes, we come to discover interesting and important facets of David's character while having confirmed certain aspects

already known. More than anything about character, however, we discover a world of morality surprising even within Hebrew narrative, a morality that insists on not killing one's would-be killer, a morality that at the same time comports well with political advantage. Contrariwise, in Homer's triad of adventures that includes the climactic cave scene, the audience is confirmed in its appraisal of Odysseus: nothing surprises, while everything in its predictability delights. The greatness of Odysseus gains added luster.

David learns and changes from experience to experience; Odysseus, however fascinating, becomes more of what he has always been as he journeys from this adventure to the next, from his initial disguises in Ithaka to his full revelation as the renowned Odysseus. Even Telemachos, son of Odysseus, discovers only who he is—that is, his destiny as a son who is a spitting image of the great Odysseus: clever, resourceful, good in battle (in confronting the unruly suitors of Penelope, with a bit of help from very few friends, the two gain a rousing victory).

Homer's hero makes mistakes, but the biblical David errs so seriously as to be an affront to the story's God, whose fixed purpose of communal well-being is compromised by David's wrongdoing. Odysseus moves on from his mistakes easily, with added luster. David confesses grave wrongdoing, repenting; in the middle sparing story, he avoids unsavory consequences. In the story ahead, David will confess, repent, and suffer grave consequences, as the community's well-being deteriorates.[14]

Odysseus is assisted by Athene in two ways, each contributing to make the hero more of what he already is: she assists in strengthening his wit and courage, and she assists in making him look better—before the folks at home, like a god. The David-God relationship couldn't be more different. Their relationship is uneasy, though not so uneasy as to cause rupture, as between Saul and God. Will God go forward with David as a king? Will David persist with a God who does nothing immediately to cover over the shame of wrongdoing, and the dire consequences? And to what end is this uncertain dynamic between David and his God? And what has God got to do with David's character, and David with God's agenda?

The story of Odysseus begins with the narrator setting the stage for an earthly mayhem that reflects an Olympian mayhem. The goddess Athene approaches her father, Zeus, with a special plea on behalf of Odysseus. Athene's favorite is stranded on the earth island of yet another goddess, Calypso. Athene asks Zeus, *Why are you so harsh on Odysseus?* Zeus responds with assurance that he holds Odysseus in high esteem, but that the sea-god Poseidon is ill disposed toward Odysseus because of his blinding of Polyphemos, Poseidon's son. The

multiplicity of gods and goddesses, with their accompanying favorites on earth, contributes to mortal misery.

Polyphemus, it happens, has informed Odysseus that the Cyclopes hold Zeus in no special regard. Such irreverence makes not a whit of difference to the god Poseidon, whose support of the lawless and grossly inhospitable monster is strictly parochial, a loyalty to his son that will bring grief to the stalwart Odysseus. That Athene has her own favorite because of a craftiness reflecting her own is in keeping with a world in which there can be no significant change regarding that which brings communal good, no significant moral foundation for allegiances.

Odysseus's character will not change, nor will that of Polyphemos. Each is adopted, sponsored, by this god or that. Odysseus's resourcefulness is what recommends him to Athene. She likes him because he is like her, and so she relates to Odysseus as his number one fan, one who can assist while making him look even better, in wisdom and stature, than he otherwise could. Odysseus is championed, then, by a goddess among many gods and goddesses whose cross-purposes reflect and influence the same among mortals.

For David and Israel, on the other hand, there is only one God,[15] one whose purpose is singular. David's God is never dramatized as being at odds with those especially chosen, never at odds with the divine selfhood. God changes the divine mind (Eli, Saul), goes in a new direction (judges to kings) without changing the divine purpose. The nearly constant cross-purposes of Odysseus's gods add to a rather fixed sort of conflict among mortals: only a god, for example, can step in and end the conflict in Ithaka. David's God entertains no such luxury, depending on the development of the ruler and the people ruled. Complexity of character, here, is in a divine changeability that has to do with means and persons.[16] But to the grand goal—an inventive future, a promise—God remains utterly faithful: through adequate human response, communal well-being for Israel, and through Israel, the same *shalom* to the world (I Kings 8:1–43; listeners could very well have picked up on Gen. 12:3).[17]

This God has an irrevocable commitment to the purpose of communal good rather than to any one leader. Not even David would appear to command God's personal guarantee of support as ruler of Israel, since we need recall not only Saul's dismissal but, even more striking, the canceling of a divine promise—that Eli would enjoy a house lasting forever, the same promise of forever that David has received.[18] God chooses Saul, who does not turn out to be suitable for God's unwavering goal of communal well-being, so God disposes of Saul (in his role as king) in favor of a better man. David both receives and earns the support of this God, but not without divine displeasure and visited harm—a

dead child, for example—when going seriously astray from the purpose of serving Israel as a godly and goodly king, toward the people's good. Nothing that Odysseus ever does is frowned on by Athene. Everything he thinks and does only recommends him to her with added divine pleasure.

Zeus's main job is to keep what peace he can among the immortals. Communal well-being on earth is not a top priority, and in fact is quite beyond the efficacious purposes of the gods and goddesses. Zeus will not cross Poseidon, for example, allowing him to harass Odysseus and his men. From the cave point on, then, Odysseus suffers from Poseidon's grudge—as do those who assist Odysseus, like the Phaiakians. The god of the sea must be appeased by the mortal offender, so that, at story's end, Odysseus will have to go on yet another journey, or so a prophecy has it. Odysseus lives, to a certain extent, in the crossfire of the immortals, but fortunately enjoys the predominant and not insignificant favor of Athene.

The biblical audience remains puzzled for a long narrative time about why God has chosen David. In what way will David prove to be the "man after [God's] own heart," and what will this tell us about God's heart (I, 13:14)? God has found Saul as one who might help, but Saul turns out to be such a failure that God looks elsewhere, finding in David someone "better" (I, 15:28). But what constitutes "better," exactly? God gives Saul a new heart, but Saul does not turn out to be what God needs. David does turn out to be that someone. Why? These kinds of possibilities and questions are impossible in the world of *The Odyssey*.

Neither Athene nor Zeus needs or depends on Odysseus or any other mortal. As noted, Zeus maintains Olympian harmony as well as he can, while mortals must fend for themselves, with the added fuel of individual immortal alliances at cross-purposes. But the God of David's story needs him, or someone like him. For what? The answer lies beyond anything redounding to David's glory, or, for that matter, redounding to this God's personal glory, except as it relates to divine purposes fulfilled.

This divine will involves another pole of possibility from Odysseus's world, namely, the solving of disastrous cross-purposes among mortals. God needs a ruler of God's people to help secure the warring conflicts among Israel's twelve tribes. And beyond: David's God is Solomon's God as well, and the God of Genesis, a God who desires that through Israel, foreigners and all peoples might experience well-being.[19] As we have seen, however, other peoples surrounding David's new kingdom are brutalized for the sake of the settling-in of Israel as a united and secure kingdom.[20] It would appear that the story's God has a formidable and problematic time of it in determining, on the one hand,

that blessing for all peoples will come through a united Israel and, on the other, that Israel cannot be Israel, united and blessed, without subduing, with ugly force at times, enemies who threaten the nation's well-being. The biblical writer may have been incapable of resolving, at least in this story, the tension between these two poles of an apparent paradox. It is enough to acknowledge here that the focus of David's story is the bringing together of a united and blessed community of God's people, Israel.

In David's capacity to attract and befriend foreigners, albeit as troops, perhaps we find a hint of the Israel-and-beyond largesse of David and David's God—and of David's son Solomon, as we have seen.[21]

Compared to the broadly communal concerns of David's God—"justice and equity" for all of the twelve tribes of Israel[22]—the relationship between Athene and Odysseus appears exclusively parochial, the goddess directing attention and admiration to the hero made in her own particular mold. All the pantheon of the divine engage in private interests; Poseidon, in fact, viciously defends the honor of his son, a barbaric giant of a fool who eats human beings he kills, eating them brains first, from top to bottom, bone and marrow and all. No such private indulgence for David's God, who has dispensed with the divinely chosen Saul. This divine cares more for God's people than with for one person chosen to lead.

Athene's focus in *The Odyssey* is helping Odysseus become more of what he is, while the biblical God helps David become more of what he can become. But this development is not for David's sake alone, or even primarily, but for the sake of this God's unchanging will for communal well-being. Only in a by-the-way sort of postscript do we find Athene interposing her will, at the end of *The Odyssey,* to enforce peace in Ithaka. Not through Odysseus does Athene act but in spite of Odysseus and all his ilk among mortals, who cannot be helped by the gods in this cause of communal peace. Revenge and glory-seeking they have with them always, these mortals—as do the immortals.

Between Athene and Odysseus there is a steadiness of relationship. "I keep watch over you in every endeavor," says Athene to a restless Odysseus (XX, lines 47–48). David's God says nearly the same: "I have been with you wherever you went" (II, 7:9). But the respective assistance of the divine differs greatly, given the worlds inhabited by each hero, and given the respective differences, in kind, of the heroes themselves.[23]

> "I took you from the pasture" [says God to David, through prophet Nathan], "from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off

> all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. (II, 7:8–11)

God's purpose in this assistance is to help David to develop into the kind of leader he can become, while helping to change much of what he unfortunately manifests, at crucial junctures. God finds someone with whom to work, someone who had been *following the sheep* and now leading sheep, the people of Israel. Lead them, *so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more* (II, 7:10).

As suggested, Athene must assist Odysseus—must intervene—to accomplish what her hero cannot: the bringing of communal well-being to Ithaka. Odysseus is helpless at this point, facing the dead suitors' murderous families. He has not had training for this; his fame does not rest on such. The biblical God has chosen David for precisely this action of communal well-being: it is David who will bring the tribes together as one nation, and lead them into a state of blessedness. God does not intervene—chooses not to, cannot?—as does Athene. Athene's hero is not being groomed for such. David is.

Athene revels in the glory of her hero, and in his pursuit and even his boasting of glory. David's God requires humility, a word that is rarely mentioned,[24] but is expressed in David's listening to God and being open to those speaking uncomfortable truth to him: Abigail, Nathan, Joab—even, finally, himself, when he confronts himself (II, 24; chapter 9).

Athene makes Odysseus's name great for Odysseus's sake. Contrariwise, as was the case for Abraham, the biblical God will make David's *a great name,* but not for David's sake. The name that counts, toward the fixed purpose of God, is God's. David's great name will serve that goal. As David's son Solomon puts it, in a prayer to God, it is because of God's name that those beyond Israel can experience Israel's well-being:

> when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land *because of your name*—for *they shall hear of your great name,* your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you. (I Kings 8:41–43; emphasis mine)

For such communal well-being does the biblical story have God choosing David in place of Saul. In a poem that is part of the story's conclusion, David acknowledges that the be-all and end-all is not the establishing of his name. David addresses God: "For this I will extol you, O Lord, among the nations, / and sing praises *to your name*" (II, 22:50; emphasis mine). Homer's Athene, on the other hand, assists in what Odysseus himself wants: a name. And what is "this" for which David sings praises to God's name?

> The Lord lives! Blessed be my rock,
> and exalted be my God, the rock of my salvation,
> the God who gave me vengeance
> and brought down peoples under me,
> who brought me out from my enemies;
> you exalted me above my adversaries,
> you delivered me from the violent.
> *For this I will extol you, O Lord, among the nations,*
> *and sing praises to your name.*
> (II, 22:47–49; emphasis mine)

The God who gave me vengeance: in the middle episode of the sparing stories, we have heard advice from Abigail, accepted by David on the spot:

> Now then, my lord, as the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, since the Lord has restrained you from bloodguilt and from taking vengeance with your own hand, now let your enemies and those who seek to do evil to my lord be like Nabal. . . . My lord is fighting the battles of the Lord; and evil shall not be found in you so long as you live. If anyone should rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living under the care of the Lord your God; but the lives of your enemies he shall sling out as from the hollow of a sling. (I, 25:26, 28–29)

For this, then, David extols God (cosmic Elohim) as Lord (intimate Yahweh), that he has been kept from vengeance in the hope that God will provide such, in good time. And for what ultimate purpose, this particular morality and God-trust? Abigail continues, "When the Lord has . . . appointed you prince over Israel, my lord shall have no cause of grief, or pangs of conscience, for having shed blood without cause or for having saved himself" (I, 25:30–31). This is what we heard God tell David, through Nathan: *I have appointed you as prince over my people, to bring them peace* (II, 7:8, 10).

For such communal peace to happen, David must be challenged, must develop, change—which he does throughout—here, under the tutelage of

Abigail. Having proven himself worthy as a leader in line with God's purpose in the sparing of Saul, the Lord's anointed, David is shown moving beyond the implicit proviso. Spare an enemy, but only if this enemy is the Lord's anointed. The implicit moral universe of David's story is never not open to more learning, more development, greater heights of morality and God-devotedness: namely, do not kill an enemy even if he is an insulting, parsimonious fool.

Odysseus adds lustre to his name by his capacity for revenge, nowhere more evident than in his slaying of his wife's suitors, who certainly have been portrayed as deserving such revenge on our great hero's part. In order to show off protégé Odysseus toward the story's end, Athene has inflamed the inhospitable ways of the suitors, urging Odysseus on to ever greater feats of revenge. But the cycle of revenge, of course, is unending—which is precisely what Odysseus and all other mortals inhabiting this world cannot stop. Athene shows up, at the point where the dead suitors' families are ready to engage Odysseus and his people in bloodly conflict: only the goddess can to stop the endless round of nasty vengeance. The storytelling world of *The Odyssey,* as I have tried to demonstrate through one key episode and its triadic context, involves essentially static characters, mortal and immortal, in action that is predictable. Odysseus, Athene, Zeus, and Poseidon: each acts, as Auerbach says, "in accordance with [their] nature[s]."[25] In *The Odyssey*, vengeance is a voracious and always hungry beast.

David, or someone like him, is necessary as an agent of God if God's faithful purpose, Israel's well-being, is to make any progress. Revenge threatens shalom. Together, God and David fight against it. David must desire true justice, and God must be prevailed upon.

And this, indeed, is what this story's David has learned above all: he is to be God's kind of leader,

> One who rules over people justly,
> ruling in the fear of God,
> [such a one] is like the light of morning,
> like the sun rising on a cloudless morning,
> gleaming from the rain on the grassy land. (II, 23:3–4)

A Final Word Regarding David, Saul, and God

> The story of David is probably the greatest single narrative representation in antiquity of a human life evolving by slow stages through time, shaped and altered by the pressures of political life, public

institutions, family, the impulses of body and spirit, the eventual sad decay of the flesh.

Alter, *The David Story,* p. ix

David is not just the first human in literature, he is the first true individual, the first modern human. . . . The great genius of his portrayal is not merely that it is convincing: it is that his nature, his individuality, drives his behavior at every crucial juncture in the story.

Halpern, *David's Secret Demons,* p. 6

What can Halpern mean, that "David is not just the first human in literature, he is the first true individual, the first modern human"? Combined with the insight of Robert Alter, above, the answer is clear: within the context of ancient literature, David proves exceptional in being *shaped and altered* by a full range of pressures (Alter), but also as one who shapes the way he acts in the world—one whose *individuality drives his behavior* (Halpern). And for all the ways that the gradual disclosure of David's complexity of motivation and ambiguity of action can strike us as somehow modern, there is also the story's claim that God has something important to do with David's uniqueness, his shaping and being shaped. Among *the pressures of political life, public institutions,* and *family* is the influence of God's need of David for a particular mission: so this narrative insists. In the end, however, David and God are characters independent of each other, both with their own wills, choicemakings, and capacities for change.

Perhaps much of the depth and complexity of David—his remarkable individuality—has to do with what is represented as the tension between, and a sometime melding of, wills both divine and human. To discover this David, we must penetrate the particular configuration of the narrative that tells David's story.

David as the first "modern human" of story is subject to the mysterious underpinnings of motivations at war with themselves, of aspects of personality and competencies in conflict with each other, with the complexity of choicemaking compounded by forces curtailing or seemingly directing such choices—God, or nurture, or nature. The apparent open-endedness of time is a corollary of characters' capacities for moral growth, and, for both God and mortal, of a capacity to change directions in a drastic way for the sake of a greater good.

As a character, David has many tendencies—the point of his multiple introductions,[26] as we have seen (chapter 2, pattern 3). Further complicating

the character of David are what emerge as capacities for both good and ill with each of the divergent traits. He develops and changes. "Who am I, O Lord God," he asks, "and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?" (II, 7:18) In part, David is expressing, like Moses before him, the opposite of a fixed self, an assured reputation, such as Odysseus boasts of. "Who am I," Moses asked of God, "that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" (Exod. 3:11) So, too, is David's question about himself.

Odysseus has become who he is as an oak tree from an acorn. His reputation for resourcefulness spreads along the way. As for David, his reputation is uncertain, his future unknown, his character a mystery.

Odysseus's fame reaches the heavens. For David, the divine reaches down, in a manner of speaking, making what the divine can be made of what there is to work with—in David's case, a mixed bag of raw talent, each capacity spread between doing well and doing ill. Odysseus can do only well, gloriously so—except for a possible mistake here and there, mistakes amounting to nothing except further occasions for increasing his reputation for curiosity, craftiness, and courage. David doesn't make "mistakes"; rather, he does such monstrous wrong as to threaten his family, the nation, and God's purposes in selecting him as ruler in the first place.

David's observation to God that "You have brought me thus far" indicates something of the journey David is on.[27] His is an open future: there is a sense of past and present opening into a future that is "indeterminate" and "contingent."[28] *Thus far you have brought me,* David says to God. David appears to be invoking God's presence for whatever lies ahead—hopefully, a "house of David" that will reign over Israel, however that might work out. *Whatever lies ahead:* all is far from clear, and proves to be quite messy.

In the end, the sense of a mysterious David, and of the God who chose him, gives way to a complexity that yields in David one coherent consciousness and in God, a rationale for choosing David over Saul. Here is a story told primarily to reveal character, moral universe, and the meaning of action, events. And why? For the benefit of an audience, the people Israel, caught up in all of the contingencies, disappointments, exile, and all other possibilities of unfolding time. Those possibilities include very unhappy endings, reversals of very desirable goals. And then, into another future, the overcoming of such tragedy.

The God of David's story, sometimes described by modern readers as inscrutable, arbitrary, or mysterious, turns out, rather, to be a God who makes excellent if complex sense. In hearing well, particularly through crafted patterns of repetition—hearing clues—the story's audience comes to know

the character of this God as it has come to know the characters of Saul and David.

David is presented as one who delighted God for reasons the seer within the story failed to comprehend or assess properly. We moderns, an audience for the most part confined and handicapped by reading, have hopefully been patient, attentive for the duration of this study—and rewarded. In coming to see David, we have come to understand the story's God as well.

Notes

PREFACE

1. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 11.

2. *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

3. *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1985.

4. *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel: A Full Interpretation Based on Stylistic and Structural Analysis,* 4 vols., Studia Semitica Neerlandica (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981–93).

5. RamatGan, Israel: Revivm, 1983, 1985, 5.

6. *II Samuel 21–24: Context, Structure and Meaning in the Samuel Conclusion,* European University Studies, series 23, Theology, vol. 682 (New York: Peter Lang, 2000). Alone among readers of whom I am aware, Klement has shown just how aptly the conclusion, a brilliantly constructed pattern of repeated elements, truly concludes the larger story of Saul, David, and God. The entire preceding narrative, as he sees, gathers up into itself three major foci of the preceding story.

7. Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999), ix–x. Interestingly, Alter concedes—wrongly, I will argue in chapters 8 and 9 here—that the last four chapters of II Samuel are not consonant with the story as a whole: "Even a reader looking for unity must concede that certain passages are not of a piece with the rest. The most salient of these is the coda placed just before the end of the David story (2 Samuel 21–24), which comprises material from four different sources, none of them reflecting the style or perspective of the David story proper. It may be unwise to think of these disparate passages as

intrusions because creating a purposeful collage of sources was demonstrably a standard literary procedure in ancient Israel" (x).

8. Brueggemann goes on: "Robert Alter has suggested that there is no overriding reason to divide the text into . . . two units [with differing authors and character-conception relating to David], but that it may be quite acceptable to see the literature all of a single piece with one 'unified imaginative conception.'" *David's Truth: In Israel's Imagination and Memory* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 41–42.

INTRODUCTION

1. NRSV (always, unless otherwise noted). Henceforth I and II Samuel will be indicated in the text, respectively, as I and II.

2. I Samuel, 16:18–19 ("So Saul sent messengers to Jesse, and said, 'Send me your son David who is with the sheep'"); 16:22 ("Saul sent to Jesse, saying, 'Let David remain in my service'"); in 17:31, David reappears in the court of Saul to volunteer his services against Goliath.

3. *Give Us a King! Samuel, Saul, and David* (New York: Schocken Books, 1999), 189.

4. Paul J. Achtemeir, in a presidential address to the Society of Biblical Literature, pointed out that in biblical times "reading was . . . oral performance *whenever* it occurred and in whatever circumstances. Late antiquity knew nothing of the 'silent solitary reader'" (emphasis in original). "Omne Verbum Sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 109 (1990): 17.

5. *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity,* translated by Eric J. Sharpe (Lund, Sweden: C. W. K. Gleercup, 1961), 163–164. This reading aloud was animated and highly inflected, as Gerhardsson suggests—a one-person story performance complete with dramatic pause and appropriate gesticulation. Willem S. Vorster is another who reminds us of the essential orality of the text: "In a long forgotten article by Josef Balogh (1927) entitled 'Voces paginarum' the author draws attention to the fact that the ancients, unlike us, used to read books (manuscripts) aloud and convincingly shows that the practice of reading silently was foreign to ancient readers." "Readings, Readers and the Succession Narrative: An Essay on Reception." *Zeitshrift für die Alttentestamentliche Wittenschraft* 98, n. 3 (August 1986): 353. See Michael Slusser, "Reading Silently in Antiquity," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111 (1992): 499. See also my introductions in *Genesis, The Story We Haven't Heard.* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVPress, 2001), and in *Luke–Acts, the Whole Story Heard* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006).

6. Garsiel is among several literary scholars recognizing the key role of such patterns in determining meaning in the story taken as a unified whole. The subtitle of his fine study indicates as much: *The First Book of Samuel: A Literary Study of Comparative Structures, Analogies and Parallels.* "It becomes clear in the course of this study," Garsiel suggests, "that in the book of Samuel a closely wrought network of internal and external comparative structures has been built up. The internal com-

parisons are fundamentally concerned with the characterization of various figures and their deeds by setting them against one another: Samuel and his parents against Eli and his sons; Saul against Samuel; David against Saul; the grim fate of Saul and his sons against that of Eli and his. . . . To expose and analyze them does not merely help us to understand the structure of the work and its craftsmanship, but also to comprehend its particular message and significance." (RamatGan, Israel, Revivm, 1985), 5.

7. Ong, quoting Haverlock (1963), in *Orality and Literacy* (New York: Methuen, 1988), 34 (emphasis mine).

8. *David and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History*. Part Three, 2 Samuel. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 5.

9. Whenever in this study reference is made to "God," I am talking about the story's God, the character of God as represented in the story of David. Within the story, the designation "Lord" (Yahweh) is used about two and a half times as much as "God" (Elohim). The distinction becomes somewhat blurred, unlike the clearly distinguished roles of Elohim in the first creation account and "Yahweh Elohim" in the second account, at the beginning of Genesis.

10. By "narrator" I will be referring not to the actual author, the writer, but to that voice within the story that is telling the story—telling us, for example, who did what, went where, and why; what certain characters, including God, are thinking and saying. Shimon Bar-Efrat points out that "the narrator in most biblical narrative appears to be omniscient, able to see actions undertaken in secret and to hear conversations conducted in seclusion, familiar with the internal workings of the characters and displaying their innermost thoughts to us." *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1989), 17. That is, we can trust this voice, though there is a minority-opinion disagreement. About such disagreement and other matters of interpretive differences there will be continuing dialogue in my endnotes. A brief summary of methodological differences appears at the conclusion of this introduction.

11. Kyle P. McCarter acknowledges God's freedom, while denying that "man after God's own heart" has anything "to do with any great fondness of Yahweh for David or any special quality of David, to whom it patently refers. Rather it emphasizes the free divine selection of the heir to the throne." *The Anchor Bible: I Samuel* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 229. To exclude a possible basis for why this story's God chooses David, in order to emphasize "the freedom of divine selection" is presumably a theological assumption, and one that makes little narrative sense as the story will demonstrate: there is something about David and his interior that distinguishes him from Saul and Saul's essential character; surely what the audience is given along these lines is something God can see, and that the audience is intended to understand. God's choice is anything but arbitrary when it comes to the divine nod in favor of David.

12. Referring to some fellow scholars, B. Arpali makes a crucial observation about the narrative ways of all biblical storytelling: "P[erry] and S[ternberg] are right in stating that the narrator in the story of David and Bathsheba refrains from

penetrating into the minds and souls of the dramatis personae. This is a narrative technique which is not only characteristic of the story of David and Bathsheba, but of the biblical story in general." "Caution: a Biblical Story! Comments on the Story of David and Bathsheba and on the Problems of the Biblical Narrative," *Hasifrut* 2 (1970): 685. The original audience, then, would be perhaps a bit less anxious about the prolonged mystery of David and God in this David story.

13. From Saul, end of eleventh century BCE (?), through the last kings of Judah, at the beginning of the sixth century BCE (the northern kingdom was destroyed in the early eighth century). See Carol Meyers's excellent overview,"Kinship and Kingship," in *The Oxford History of the Biblical World,* ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 165–205.

14. The singular books became two-volume affairs when translated from Hebrew into the wordier Greek manuscripts. Chronicles actually begins with an extensive genealogy from Adam up through David: the first fifty-four verses of the first chapter alone bring us only up to offspring of Jacob/Israel. The period of Israel's monarchy is thereby located within the broadest possible context of God's care for Israel and the world.

15. The tribes of Israel sink to their lowest moral and political point just before monarchy is instituted; the last long sequence of Judges recounts sexual and civil violence (19:1–21:25).

16. The story of David told in Samuel and I Kings 1–2 is from a larger narrative context that runs from Deuteronomy through Joshua, Judges, and Kings. Biblical scholarship of the Hebrew Bible over the past century and a half has been consumed by the history of this "deuteronomistic" composition. In their *Israel Constructs Its History: Historiography in Recent Research,* Albert De Pury, Thomas Romer, and Jean-Daniel Macchi begin this history with what it is called, "The Starting Point: A Literary Work." Concerned with meaning and moral point of view, De Pury *et al* assert, quite correctly, the importance of emphasizing "that we have no way to approach the question of Dtr ideology other than on the basis of a literary work. We do not have any other information at our disposal on this milieu that we call 'Dtr'; for example, neither on its authors, nor on their life, their formation and their eventual professional activity. Notes about this Dtr movement and its authors from *other* contemporaries would be very interesting to us. But unfortunately, we have just one source of information: a literary work. Now this is far from constituting a satisfactory basis for solid evaluation; but we have no other alternative: we must start from what remains for us as documents of the period." Then, in a one-sentence paragraph, "If I speak of a 'literary work,' I am thinking especially of Dtr Historiography (DH)." (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 425. The complicated history of such storytelling is indicated in a focus of concern in this book, chaps. 5–8 of II Samuel (King David's accomplishment of a united kingdom, and return of the ark): "The place of chs. 5–8 in the history of the redaction has been the object of much discussion. Whatever may be the broader unity integrating these chapters before the Deuteronomistic redaction, their present position within 2 Samuel as a whole as well as certain phrases used in these chapters are clearly due to the Deuteronomistic

editor" (260). And as I will show, recent critics like Robert Polzin, Steven McKenzie, and Baruch Halpern assume the "Deuteronomistic editor" to be more sophisticated than merely an editor, namely, a *writer/author* in fact.

17. "The moral and psychological complication with which both men are imagined," Alter adds, parenthetically, "argues powerfully against the simplification of sorting out the book into 'Davidide' and 'Saulide' narratives." *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999), xix.

18. Samuel was probably written by a final writer/editor in the sixth century BCE, in Babylonian exile. Contrary to the current fashion of seeing in David the seeds of monarchal evil, the narrator of I and II Kings appears to hold David up as a model of "walking before the Lord" (I Kings 8:25; 9:4, for example) and the paradigmatic king against whom others must measure themselves before God (I Kings 14:8). I return to this key point and some of the scholarship later, especially in chapters 8 and 9.

19. The man of God has a good idea who among Jesse's sons should be king. Eliab, oldest son and superior in all apparent ways, catches his eye. But the prophet's eye is flawed. All seven sons parade before Samuel, but God turns each of them down. David is an outsider, outside the circle of seven, out in the fields. Away from the family homestead, he is apparently beyond even his father's purview (I, 16:5–11). Jesse seems to have thought the seven sons sufficient to conduct the aforementioned sacrifices with family.

20. "What shall be done for the man who kills this Philistine?" asks young David, whose father had sent him to the battlefield with lunch for his older brothers. David insists on asking warriors standing around about the reward, though he has already heard the answer in their prior conversation: the reward is marriage to the king's daughter and access to the throne of Saul (I, 17:23–27). David's oldest brother is peeved at his youngest brother's presumption in such probing, to which the boy responds—impishly?—"What have I done now? It was only a question" (I, 17:28–29).

21. Questions raised by biblical scholarship can put the literary critic on alert. How can it be, for example, that after two introductions in which David has been identified as Jesse's son that even the narrator (always authoritative within biblical narratives) informs the audience for the third time: "David was the son of . . . Jesse, who had eight sons" (first time, I, 16:1; second time, I, 16:18–19; third time, the narrator, I, 17:12)?

22. I review representative views at the end of this introduction.

23. An uneven and self-contradictory text works as superior only for those readers whose delight is in "deconstructing" a presumably well-constructed (or revered) text, or for those readers whose religious preference is to throw up one's hands in worship of a God whose sovereignty is measured by the degree of divine mystery and inscrutability.

24. Herbert H. Klement offers a remarkably insightful analysis of this chiastic conclusion to the David story, with analysis of how this pattern interlocks with prior patterns, encompassing the entire story: "The history of the interpretation of the Samuel Conclusion (2 Sam. 21–24) has produced a situation in which these texts have

been predominantly approached with a large degree of misunderstanding. Although they may have been dealt with as individual narratives, they have seldom been examined in the light of their function in the immediate context and wider relationship of the book." *II Samuel 21–24: Context, Structure and Meaning in the Samuel Conclusion,* European University Studies, series 23, Theology, vol. 682 (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 161.

25. *The David Story,* ix–x. See note #7 of the preface regarding Alter's sense that the last four chapters of II Samuel may not fit easily into the story as a whole. I think otherwise (see chapters 8 and 9)

26. Robert Alter has suggested that there is no overriding reason to divide the text into these two units [with differing authors and character-conception relating to David], but that it may be quite acceptable to see the literature all of a single piece with one "unified imaginative conception." *The David Story,* 41–42.

27. Rost concludes his analysis of the so-called succession narrative (from David's becoming king through the succession of Solomon to the throne): "The finest work of Hebrew narrative art has passed before our eyes. Our task has been to isolate it and determine its limits, to study its style and structure, its historical trustworthiness, and its contribution to our knowledge of the theological outlook and religious devotion of the early monarchic period. As a preliminary step we looked at the subsidiary sources used by the narrator: the ark narrative, Nathan's prophecy, the account of the Ammonite war, all three the products of the closing stages of the Davidic period and each having in some respect a surprising individuality. In this first blossoming of Hebrew literature we see with some amazement a series of authors fighting to carry off the laurels; and so we are afforded remarkable insight into the richly varied climate of contemporary religious thought. Alongside the narrator of the ark source, a plain and popular storyteller with a fondness for edification and a piety strongly conditioned by the cult, there are the authors of the oldest strata of Nathan's prophecy with their deep interest in the royal house of David and their humble piety. The sober, factual account of the Ammonite war gives us a glimpse into the heart of a godfearing soldier, while the artistically structured story of the succession shows us a member of the court who views cultic life with a certain reserve and recognizes God at work in the normal course of history. This, of course, hardly completes the picture of literary activity in the Davidic and Solomonic epochs, for the Abiathar source also belongs to the period and some individual fragments as well (such as David's last words, perhaps the Solomon story, too, and works available to the Yahwist). Only by examining these and taking them into account could we have a complete picture of the literary creativity of the early monarchic period. That, however, is a task well beyond the scope of the present undertaking." *The Succession to the Throne of David* (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1982), 115. Notice that the possibility of viewing these discrete sources/traditions/stories from within a whole and coherent narrative is not raised but, rather, only the prospect of carefully exploring all of the discrete stories/sources that make up the present canonical story of David, in Samuel and I Kings 1–2.

28. The field of biblical studies has been greatly influenced by the work of literary critics like Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg, and J. P. Fokkelman.

29. The growing crossover between traditional biblical scholarship with literary criticism has led, in my judgment, to uneven results and confused methodologies. In the case of the David story, especially, it appears to me that literary critics like Alter and company have made much better use of biblical scholarship than biblical scholars have made of literary tools and discipline. Much of what the exegete of historical bent discovers and what the literary critic uncovers can be, ideally, mutually informing. The problem of textual variants, for example, often cannot be adjudicated without the holistic literary perspective that suggests the appropriateness of this or that reading as determined by an interpretive hypothesis best accounting for myriad textual detail.

30. "Even the most hardened adherents of historical criticism and related types of historical analysis of the text of the Hebrew Bible must pay some lip service to the final form of the parts that are distinguishable in the texts, otherwise they can hardly defend the basic thesis that the present text was amalgamated from various layers of writing and redaction. . . . Some scholars tend toward the position that the text is most usefully studied entirely in its present form. Although this eliminates the dichotomy sketched above, and turns out to be a remarkably useful and productive hypothesis, it does not solve the problem of the origin of the texts, nor can it provide a model that explains why they look the way they do." *The Origin of the History of Israel: Herodotus' Histories as Blueprint for the First Books of the Bible* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), viii.

31. Bruce C. Birch, *The First and Second Books of Samuel,* in *The New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1998), II:949.

32. "Results of source–criticism . . . have tended to obscure the literary character of the Samuel books by depriving them both of their autonomy as books and of the commonality of texture and perspective that unites them with most other books of the Hebrew Bible. The same careful interplay of poetic fragment, folkloric tradition, archival notation, and elaborated narrative that inform biblical literature as a whole . . . can be found in Samuel." Rosenberg's conclusion seems obvious enough: "The best explication of the work is not one that focuses on literary techniques as isolated phenomena [or sources], but one that follows out its lines of thought and unfolding story and the gradual deployment and development of its manifold themes." "Samuel," in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 122, 123.

33. "The biblical outlook," says Alter, "is informed, I think, by a sense of stubborn contradiction, of a profound and ineradicable untidiness in the nature of things, and it is toward the expression of such a sense of moral and historical reality that the composite artistry of the Bible is directed." (154)

Alter is less confident than I in the achievement of "composite artistry." He has not ventured into an analysis of whole narratives like the David story, or Genesis, or the shorter "stories" of Genesis—the Abraham story, for example.

34. "[T]he theme which should be a major focus of a study of deuteronomistic theology, and how that theology was received in the wider Old Testament context, is how the deuteronomist perceives the nature of Israel in its relationship to Yahweh

and how the Pentateuch responds to that perception. The deuteronomistic perception of the nature of Israel and its relationship with Yahweh developed between the first and second editions of the history: the first edition perceives Israel as a royal state, with the king as successor to Moses in the role of lawgiver and mediator between Israel and Yahweh; the revision, introducing theological commentary such as 2 Kgs 17.7–23 and 34b–41, effected a change of interest from the king to Israel as a whole: it is on the people and not on the king that responsibility for the welfare of Israel rests." De Pury *et al. Israel Constructs Its History: Deuteronomistic Histiography in Recent Research,* 476. The second and last edition, resulting in the text's final form, according to this view, is shaped in part by historical circumstance of exile, "appropriate to the status of a pariah people, living in economic and political dependence. This is what Israel was in the process of becoming; this is the Israelite identity confirmed and established in the Pentateuch"—which De Pury, with others, takes to be completed after the deuteronomisitic narrative (480).

35. Simplifying the end of David, Gunn also asserts that David fades "to a shell of a man." I further elaborate Gunn's inadequate answers to the David mystery in my conclusion. *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation.* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1978), 103.

36. Ibid., 115.

37. Ibid., 128.

38. Ibid., 115–116.

39. Ibid., 129.

40. Ibid., 110–111.

41. "I will follow the conventional assumption that there are two great narratives about David," Brueggemann asserts. "'The Rise of David' (I, 16:1–II, 5:5) is one of these. . . . It is the account of David moving from the margin to the center of power. The other, to which we now turn, is called the 'Succession Narrative,' so named because it asked in I Kings 1:20, "Who shall sit on the throne after David?" Brueggemann then makes a claim presumably accounting for the hopeless contradiction: "I presume that in the Succession Narrative we have a different storyteller. No longer are we dealing with trustful truth that is incapable of criticism [embodied in David X]; now we have a way of truth that looks more closely, if not with suspicion, at least critically and knowingly [at David Y]. Walter Brueggemann, *David's Truth: In Israel's Imagination and Memory* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 41, 43.

42. Ibid., 16.

43. Ibid.

44. "Currently we say the truth is polyvalent," Brueggemann notes. "That is, it moves in a variety of directions and cannot be reduced to a single formulation. That rich, varied discernment is obvious as we consider the various pieces of literature that come from different hands in different contexts for different purposes. Each of them touches a dimension of this 'larger-than-life' person who is surely not larger than truth. But this same polyvalent tendency is also evident in each particular narrative, because the person of David is inscrutable. And therefore the narrative must always be a bit unsure. But that is what makes a good story. [Really!?] So we may ask

about each text, which David? Or whose David? Two extremes may be noted. On the one hand, Steve McKenzie characterized David as a 'bloodthirsty oversexed bandit.' About the same David, Samuel Terrien can say, 'The purity of David's faith assumed a quality of elegance which has often gone unnoticed in modern times. . . . We may look for pure faith and be surprised to find a bandit. We may look for 'the truth' and find only David. Or we may seek for David and be surprised at meeting the truth. One never knows." Ibid., 15–16.

45. *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), xiv.

46. Ibid., xiv–xv.

47. Ibid., 264.

48. Steven L. McKenzie, *King David: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 32–34.

49. McKenzie suggests "two major principles as guidelines" for his project: "the principle of skepticism" ("history is often molded or bent to accommodate the lesson that the writer wishes to teach") and a "second principle"—what "J. Maxwell Miller calls that of analogy. It holds that the past was basically analogous to the present and to what is known of similar societies and circumstances. Another way of putting Miller's point is that people everywhere and at all times have the same basic ambitions and instincts. This includes David. The principle of analogy addresses the question of the real motives behind David's actions in 1–2 Samuel. It asserts that David acted in accord with the customs and motives common among ancient Middle Eastern rulers and with general human tendencies in his acquisition and retention of power." Ibid., 44–45.

50. Robert Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist,* 3:55–56. This rather Procrustean hypothesis leads Polzin to many questionable conclusions—that Samuel, for example, is portrayed in 1 Samuel 7 "as an idealized judge who would succeed to leadership in exilic times." (*Samuel and the Deuteronomist,* 2: San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1989), 81.

51. "Literary Exegesis of Biblical Narrative: Between Poetics and Hermeneutics," in J. P. Rosenblatt and J. C. Sitterson Jr., eds., *"Not in Heaven"—Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 124.

52. "Mirror-Image Story—An Additional Criterion for the Evaluation of Characters in Biblical Narrative," *Tarbiz* 54, n. 2 (1985), 165–76.

53. Garsiel's subtitle. My work: *The Way According to Luke: Hearing the Whole Story of Luke-Acts* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006); *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVPress, 2001).

54. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981). See especially chap. 3.

CHAPTER 1

1. For example, traditional biblical scholars find for the portion of narrative focusing on David at least three blocks of narrative material often thought to be the work

of different authors, arranged consecutively: "The Rise of David" (I, 16-II, 10); "The Succession Narrative" (II, 11–20); and the so-called Appendix (II, 21–24). This third block, as I will show, interweaves with a block concerning Saul (which itself reveals several blocks, say some scholars). That is, mention of Saul's wrongdoing in II, 21 echoes other of Saul's wrongdoing, before David appears on the scene—while at the same time this echo in II, 21 is echoed by a paralleled instance of David doing wrong. In turn, David's doing wrong at the end of II Samuel echoes three prior instances of David's doing wrong, each of the four instances constituting a pattern for David of wrongdoing-confrontation-response-consequence.

2. With no king, everyone, the narrator tells us, was "doing what was right in his or her own eyes" (Judg. 21:25). "The final chapters of the book of Judges seem to form a prelude," observes J. W. Wesselius, "though a very unusual one, to the events of the books of Samuel. . . . [The] series of stories [concluding Judges] provides a good point of departure for the books of Samuel, both because of the stories' location and because they depict the total state of lawlessness and wantonness reigning in Israel at the end of the time of the Judges, when it was acutely felt that 'there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes' (Judg. 21.25)." *The Origin of the History of Israel: Herodotus' Histories as Blueprint for the First Books of the Bible* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 107–108.

3. The canonical ordering of the Hebrew Scriptures appears quite correct in moving directly from Judges into I Samuel; the Christian canon inserts Ruth between the two. Samuel functions as a bridge figure between the rule of judges and kings; he is called *seer* or *prophet* (I, 3:20, 9:9), never *judge,* although he is shown with judge-like capacities, sitting at the gate—a place for adjudicating peoples' complaints (and we are told that "he had judged Israel forty years" [I, 4:18]).

4. I Samuel 7:3–17 indicates the kind of respite enjoyed by Israel under Samuel; see 9:11–14 as an example of the communal sacrifices of well-being offered by Samuel.

5. A possible foreboding of what will become the issue, in I and II Kings, with the monarchal dynasty of David—within whose line will be kings who are guilty of idolatry, take bribes, pervert justice, and put at risk the divine promise of an everlasting dynasty for David.

6. Lyle Eslinger notes what appears to be the narrator's "setting up," in a positive light, Israel's request for a king: "Intervening between the request for a king (8.5) and the conclusion to ch. 7 are four verses of narration. In vv. 1–3 the decaying state of affairs in Samuel's family is described. In v. 4 the narrator describes the elders convening and then going to Samuel. The convention is obviously a response to the family affairs of Samuel (cf. 8.5)." Eslinger is most cautious about what seems fairly obvious in a close reading: "Remarkably, the deterioration in the house of Samuel, Israel's judge and covenantal mediator, is virtually identical to the state of affairs that had existed in the priestly Elide house. Is this paralleling done intentionally by the narrator? Is Israel aware of the parallel and requesting a king to avert a repetition of the disaster at Ebenezer (ch. 4)?" *Kingship of God in Crisis: A Close Reading of 1 Samuel 1–12.* (Decatur, Georgia: Almond Press, 1985), 60.

7. I will explore that context in chapter 5. "If ch. 7 [1 Samuel] is read by itself as the context for ch. 8," Eslinger points out, "then McCarter [*I Samuel, The Anchor Bible Commentary,* vol. 8] is right to say that it sets the request for a king in a very bad light (1980:151). But ch. 7 itself cannot be divorced from its own context and that includes ch. 2.1–6. Could there be some rationale for the request for a king in the events described in chs. 2–6? The possibility deserves examination." *Kingship of God in Crisis,* 59.

In a conclusion of sorts to *Kingship of God in Crisis,* Eslinger offers a quite helpful and nuanced perspective: "The conditions and stipulations that are established for the new theocratically subordinate monarchy are no different than those of the premonarchic, theocractic covenant. Ch. 12 exhibits the same literary form and the same requirements as the Sinaitic (Exod. 19) and Shechemite (Josh 24) covenants (Muilenburg 1959:361–65). Nothing has changed (12.14; cf. Exod 19.5). Israel's capitulation is obtained by a show of divine force (12.17f) and the people respond as we would expect. . . . Samuel reassures the people of his prayers for them (12.23) and of Yahweh's good intentions towards them (12.22). No evil will come upon Israel [under a king] so long as it is faithful to Yahweh (12.22–25)" (62).

8. Whenever I mention a story's character by name, it should be assumed that I am talking of a narrative character rather than the actual person. Because readers may well be religious Jews or Christians, this story's God will coincide, of course, with the God of their faith.

9. Bruce Birch offers an "analysis of chapters 7–15 [disclosing] that at the earliest distinguishable level lies a sizable group of old, independent traditions concerning the period of the establishment of the kingship in Israel." *The Rise of the Israelite Monarchy: The Growth and Development of 1 Samuel 7–15* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1976), 132. "At the other end of the process through which chapters 7–15 came into their present shape [the canonical version] stands the work of the Deuteronomist" (135)—a writer to whom Birch attributes great skill, if not complete mastery of the given materials into a seamless whole. If we view this material introducing Saul and kingship as mutually supporting phases of interlocking patterns, however, a quite unified and coherent narrative can be seen.

10. Ironically, Samuel will be impressed with Eliab, first son of Jesse and in the prime of his life—but God says, "do not look on his appearance or the height of his stature" (I, 16:7).

11. John Van Seters represents very well the traditional biblical scholar's approach to "the story of Saul," as he calls this material. "Since the time of J. Wellhausen, the stories about Saul have been divided into two blocks of material, often characterized as the Early Source and the Late Source. The Early Source comprises the stories in 1 Sam. 9:1–10:16 and chapters 11. 13, and 14, and within this source are the oldest traditions about Saul's monarchy. The Late Source, consisting of 1 Sam. 8, 10:17–27, and chapters 12 and 15, is usually ascribed to a Dtr editor and is regarded as having few early traditions behind it." *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983), 250. But even within early and late sources there are, Van Seters

suggests, further possible sources: "In turning to the Early Source, we find a broad scholarly consensus that the first story in 1 Sam. 9:11–10:16 is not a unity. While some difference of opinion remains on a few details, it is generally agreed that the oldest story simply dealt with Saul's recovery of his father's asses and that a later redactor introduced into this story the theme of Saul's divine election and anointing" (250). The measure of artistry, as I demonstrate in this chapter, is the juggling and interweaving of sources into a compelling whole, a narrative account of Saul that economically yields his entire character—including character flaws that prove him unsuitable to reign as king, despite God's having chosen him to do so.

12. Moses, in Exod. 3–4; Gideon, Judg. 6:15.

13. Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel: A Commentary,* trans. J. S. Bowden from the 2nd German ed. (1960) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 88. The use of "lots," as indicated by Joshua 7:16–18, is presented as a divinely inspired process of elimination, from tribal entities down to families and then down to the individual person.

14. A held shield would tend to cover the one good eye, the left, as Robert Alter points out. *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1999). All references hereafter to Alter's commentary will correspond to his chapter-and-verse annotation.

15. P. Kyle McCarter Jr. notes this wordplay in Hebrew on Saul's *appointment* by God as king and his *appointment* missed, with the prophet Samuel. In so small a repetition, we find major illumination concerning the problem with Saul. In what otherwise can seem an innocuous offense, the conjunction of appointments (God-appointed, prophet-appointment) suggests the severity of Saul's wrongdoing and his unsuitability as king. *The Anchor Bible: I Samuel* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 228–230.

16. Samuel performed functions of both prophet and priest.

17. David M. Gunn, for example: "[Saul] is remarkably attentive (almost to the end) to the ritual acknowledgement of Yahweh. Indeed both times he is found guilty of breaking a commandment of God he has done what he has done in order to honour him by sacrifice. He is prepared to acknowledge his error (whether comprehendingly or not), and even in rejection, worship him. Saul is not disloyal to Yahweh." *The Fate of King Saul* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1980), 124. Just how wrong this judgment appears to be will become more clear here, and in later chapters.

18. *The Reign and Rejection of King Saul: A Case for Literary and Theological Coherence* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); see especially 65–66.

19. Surely God can work with anyone, as an alert audience of other Hebrew narratives would know: the initially faithless and curse-bringing Abraham (Gen. 20:9–13; see 12:10–20); the consistently God-resisting Jacob (not until the plot resolution in Gen. 33:20 does Jacob claim God as his God, on the basis of the Lord's making good on all the divine promises (Gen. 28:20–22); the tattle-telling, dream-boasting Joseph (Gen. 37:2; 5–10); the frustratingly reluctant partner, Moses, who drove God to divine distraction and anger (Exod. 3:10–11, [2] 3:13, [3] 4:1, [4] 4:10, [5] 4:13–16). Why, then, does God refuse to work with Saul? The story of Saul is different.

20. The marauding Amalekites had attacked the Israelites who were escaping from Egypt; the people of God were weary. After the victory God declared that the Amalekites would be "blotted out" (Exod. 17:14).

21. We know that Samuel speaks the truth about God's sending him to anoint Saul king, because the narrator has told us so (I, 9:15–17). It follows as likely, then, that we are to trust what Samuel reports in the second part of the sentence: these are the Lord's words.

22. Cheryl Exum is representative: "Yhwh selects Saul as Israel's first king, but at the same time views him as an unwelcome usurper of divine leadership. Thus the first king must pay dearly for the people's sin, their 'evil' according to I, 12:17 and 19, of requesting a human monarch." *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 35.

23. Alter, *The David Story* (see annotation to I, 15:25).

24. "Princely Characters," in J. P. Rosenblatt and J. C. Sitterson Jr., eds., *"Not in Heaven"—Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 66–67.

25. Fabrizio Foresti, for example, finds in I Samuel 15 both genuine reasons for God's dismissal of Saul and genuine repentance from Saul and therefore unfair dismissal: one Deuteronomistic tradition, according to Foresti, "motivates the king's fall by introducing, between the two ancient complexes, the account of Saul's violation of the *herem* in the campaign against the Amalekites. As a consequence of his disobedience, Saul is rejected from his office. The story, however, ends with the mention of Saul's repentance, 1 Sm 15:30f. The two contrasting attitudes in Saul's behavior [genuine wrongdoing; genuine repentance] as depicted in 1 Sm 15 allow the author of the account to explain not only the negative light in which Saul is characterized throughout the *Aufstiegsgeschicht* [rise of David] but also why Saul survives so long after his rejection." *The Rejection of Saul In the Perspective of the Deuteronomistic School: A Study of 1 Sm 15 and Related Texts* (Rome: Edizioni Del Teresianum, 1984), 180.

26. Joel Rosenberg, among other critics, asserts that "Samuel's denunciation of Saul seems predetermined and disproportionate, especially in the light of Saul's repentant behavior in 15:24–31." "I and II Samuel," in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 127.

27. Walter Brueggemann, citing a presumed "antimonarchial source," asserts that "the particular narrative character who is the vehicle for this deep dispute over social power is Saul." Conjecture built on conjecture—each of which may be true—leads to this erroneous judgment regarding the narrator's purposes in the final form of the text: "[Saul] is anointed king at the behest of YHWH, but apparently he is never free from dispute enough to function in fact as king. In the retelling of the narrative in 1 Samuel, not only is Saul held in thrall by the dispute, but in fact he is 'fated' to failure by the looming presence of David in the horizon of the narrative, even before David is even mentioned." *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 134.

28. *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History.* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 2:217–218.

29. Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg offers a helpful hint here: "Obedience is . . . even from a theological point of view, more than the best fat of rams. Hence Samuel rejects Saul's view that it did not matter how God came into possession of the plunder. As a consequence of this, disobedience is identified with the sin of divination—which Saul himself practiced (I, 28:9)—and with 'iniquity and idolatry,' which in this context is thought to come to the same thing (cf. also Judg. 17:4f)." *I and II Samuel: A Commentary,* trans. J. S. Bowden from the 2nd German ed. (1960) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 128. That is, to manipulate the sacrifice through a disobedient act is to seek to manipulate, in effect, God.

30. This can sound like modern psychobabble were it not for the profound explorations in the Genesis narrative of just such making-a-name-for-yourself complexes, the drive to be something greater (like the gods!) than who you were created to be: Eve and Adam, Cain, Lamech, Babel builders—then Abraham, Jacob, even Joseph, and certainly several of his brothers. See chap. 1 in my *Genesis, The Story We Haven't Heard* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVPressI 2001).

31. "Princely Characters," 64–65.

32. Steven L. McKenzie is typical of many biblical scholars who are essentially historical. "[The Deuteronomist's] account of Saul's reign well illustrates his compositional techniques," McKenzie suggests. "The three stories [introducing Saul as king] came from three different sources that were available to Dtr. Rather than choosing among them, he combined all three by means of a series of editorial additions. . . . By means of these additions Dtr united three separate stories into a single one in which Saul becomes king in stages: privately, publicly, and then by proving his prowess as a military leader. He then encased these stories within the framework of the speeches in chapters 8 and 12, which have long been recognized as his composition." *King David: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 28–30. While true enough, this accounting does not note or explain the resonating echoes that crescendo in rendering Saul an inept leader.

33. In trying to prove her hypothesis that Saul is a tragic figure, Cheryl Exum must interpret not only Saul as fatally flawed hero, but God as an ambivalent and somewhat capricious force. Exum finds something missing from what I consider the correct view of Edwin Good: "In his 1965 study, *Irony in the Old Testament,* Edwin Good offers a compelling reading of the story of King Saul in terms of its tragic dimension. Good and others have drawn attention to the theological problem addressed by this material: Yhwh opposes the people's demand for a king yet grants their request; he selects for them a king but one who fails to live up to his calling. Good analyzes the ambiguous nature of kingship and shows clearly how Saul's strengths are undermined by his weaknesses. He goes too far, however, in arguing the case for Saul's inability to meet kingship's challenges. For Good, Saul's major problem is his self-depreciation and concern for his status with the people; he is 'little in his own eyes.' The issue of Saul's qualifications for kingship is only part of the problem; Good neglects the essential feature of Saul's tragedy, the ambivalent role of

the deity" (*Tragedy and Biblical Narrative,* 17). But biblical narrative and its tragedy—and comedy, for that matter—are not Homer's or Sophocles' or Aristotle's. The capricious fate or god of the Greeks is unevenly paralleled by the Hebrew God, whose mind can change, but within a realm of reasonability established by the narrator: this divine will is not arbitrary, as I will be demonstrating throughout this study.

34. "God 'regrets' having made Saul king (I, 15:11). The confrontation with Saul is bracketed with divine regret, for the chapter ends by saying again that the Lord was 'sorry' to have made Saul king. . . . The experiment with Saul is over." *The First and Second Books of Samuel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections.* in *The New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1998), 2:10 (88).

35. P. Kyle McCarter points to the obvious, that "we are not told *why* he hides," but without linking this act with others in the pattern of introductions and of wrongdoing-response. "Is his motive modesty (cf. 9:21) or timidity?" McCarter asks, concluding that "to seek Saul's motive is to miss the point. The purpose for which this little incident is told is wordplay, and its chief interest is Saul's name. Samuel inquires of (*sa'al*) Yahweh, "Has the man come here?" When the man is found, then, he is *sa'ul,* 'the one asked (of Yahweh),' that is, 'Saul.' But in any case this turn of events does not present Saul as a bold and eager aspirant to the new office." *II Samuel, The Anchor Bible.* Vol. 9. (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 196. McCarter is surely correct in his final judgment of the matter, in the final sentence here, but the detail serves for more than wordplay, as I have demonstrated.

36. Barbara Green, *How Are the Mighty Fallen? A Dialogical Study of King Saul in 1 Samuel* (New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), has it right: "Saul's own clearest character is to be malleable, suggestible," she notes. "There is a strange indecision at his center" (219). "Is the God of this story to blame in any way? No. The king falls fundamentally out of any relationship at all with God. Saul, not knowing what his kingly task really is, will charge and defend, will tack and bear down with little insight as he performs his role. And, not surprisingly, he will miss most of the time, since he lacks fundamental insight. The king, the monarchy, is a blind guide, an unsighted figure refusing to acknowledge the problem and blustering so as to conceal it, mostly only from himself" (221). What, then, is Saul's root problem? "It is not a matter of effort, since Saul consistently tries to get at what is expected of him. Nor, in my reading, is that word maliciously withheld from him or twisted upon him by deity or prophet. The problem is more foundational: the king's incapacity to act answerably rises from his vast and empty self-center. . . . Lacking confidence that the numbers [in the first wrongdoing] are adequate for a victory, he fearfully moves to placate God (I, 13:8–12). Saul then mistakes a battle for his own personal vendetta, a royal choice from which flow a number of sacral violations (I, 14:24–46). He next confuses sacrifice with the radical state of *herem* consecration (I, 15:13–21). He fears the people would placate or manipulate God rather than heeding God and restraining the people. Consequently, though he in fact achieves two victories here, he fails more fundamentally to serve the deeper purposes of his kingship: minding the basic bond between YHWH and people, saving the people from situations that most obviously threaten it" (259).

37. Missing the patterned echoes can lead to wrongheaded conclusions, like this assertion of David M. Gunn: "[Saul's] condemnation (rejection) is radically out of balance with the nature of his 'crimes.' His explanations and the evidence of his 'good faith' are conspicuously ignored. For a God who looks 'not on the outward appearance' but 'on the heart' (I, 16:7), Yahweh takes a surprisingly superficial look at Saul's actions before 'repenting' and rejecting him. Saul's rejection is not intrinsically and inevitably the outcome of his actions." *The Fate of King Saul,* 124.

38. Long, *The Reign and Rejection of King Saul: A Case for Literary and Theological Coherence*. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989). 167.

39. Alter, *The David Story,* xix. At the end of II Samuel we return explicitly to Saul, who has been pivotal in the drama up through the end of I Samuel.

40. The excellent work of John Van Seters suggests, at this point, how very different are the methodologies of the biblical scholar and the literary critic, with their obviously different goals and appropriate results. That the biblical scholar can be helped by the literary critic, and vice versa, is a crucial study beyond the purpose of this book, which I hope, for the careful reader, demonstrates that reciprocity.

"We have already seen that scholars disagree about where the story of Saul ends and the story of David begins," Van Seters notes. "Following the lead of Wellhausen, who regards 1 Sam. 16:1–13 as a later addition, many scholars are inclined to begin the story of David with 16:14. A. Weiser, however, argues that 16:1–13 is an integral part of the work and he therefore begins the story with 16:1. Recently Gronbaek has argued that because 1 Sam. 15 cannot be separated from 16:1ff., and because 14:47–52 contains an obvious conclusion, the story of David must actually begin with the account of the rejection of Saul. Yet in another study of the story of David, Mildenburger has argued that the story of Saul cannot be separated from the story of David; the whole work thus begins with 1 Sam. 9." *In Search of History,* 264.

CHAPTER 2

1. In the conclusion to this study I explore in depth a telling contrast between Homer's Odysseus and the biblical David.

The sources of the epigraphs at the head of this chapter are as follows. Lore Segal, "II Samuel," in David Rosenberg, ed., *Congregation: Contemporary Writers Read the Jewish Bible* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1987), 109; Everett Fox, *Give Us a King! Samuel, Saul, and David* (New York: Schocken Books, 1999), xxvi; Robert Pinksy, *The Life of David* (New York: Shocken Nextbook, 2005), 65; Robert Polzin, *David and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History,* Part Three, 2 Samuel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 85.

2. Carol Meyers puts the matter quite succinctly, though as I will show, her view (my view also) has numerous detractors: "David—the epitome of the royal figure and the embodiment of the later hope for restoration—is the DH's [Deuteronomist historian's] central figure in its account of the early monarchy." *The Oxford History of the Biblical World,* ed. Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 171.

3. "Close the circle" is H. W. Hertzberg's translation, based on the Hebrew *sabab*. *I and II Samuel: A Commentary,* translated by J. S. Bowden from the 2nd German ed. (1960) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964, 138).

4. "The number ['seven of his sons'] is a favourite in biblical and other stories; compare the dreams of Pharaoh in Gen. 41." *Cambridge Bible Commentary: 1 Samuel.* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 133.

5. "Our first contact with David [second, actually—after the anointing scene] shows him to be largely receptive, responsive, and quiescent, mostly an object of contemplation, someone strikingly pleasing to the eye and ear. He is young and ruddy, the narrator tells us, with beautiful eyes and handsome to look at (v. 12); he is a skillful musician, a man of valor and of war, prudent in speech and of good presence, Saul's young servant relates (v. 18)." *David and the Deuteronomist,* 2:155.

6. Whether such is the case, of course, must be determined by viewing textual parts within a whole—in this case, the discordant introductions of David within a pattern that may, or may not, establish expectations for the entire story. Bernard Levinson takes most literary critics of biblical narrative to task for purportedly ignoring the diachronic study of biblical narrative (history of textual formation) in favor of an erroneously exclusive synchronic approach (determining the *what* of a text by exploring its *how* in order to understand the narrative whole and the interrelationship of all its story parts). He focuses on, and faults, the work of Meir Sternberg in particular (*The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985]), whom I will have occasion to engage throughout this study: "Like Auerbach before him, Sternberg works from the perspective of the entire scope of Western literature to demonstrate the rich complexity of biblical narrative," but—Levinson's main point—"without adequate examination of the narrative's textual history." "The Right Chorale: From the Poetics to the Hermeneutics of the Hebrew Bible," in J. P. Rosenblatt and J. C. Sitterson, Jr., eds., *"Not in Heaven"—Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 129. "Can indeed the narrative texts of the Bible adequately be comprehended as the work of a 'narrator'"? Levinson asks. By way of focus on the two contradictory flood accounts of Genesis, Levinson seeks "to demonstrate that the use of a synchronic method, a *poetics* of narrative, cannot provide a comprehensive reading of crucial biblical narrative texts. To the contrary, the conventional diachronic (historical-critical) method not only is essential but also points to just those textual aspects of the Bible that the newer literary critics should find most engaging" (130).

I will be assuming, throughout this study, the reality of varying oral traditions with various cultic and temporal backgrounds, but without a diachronic study of the same: my interest, presumably to be faulted by Levinson, is to assume that my synchronic approach can proceed with genuine enlightenment without engaging the source history. I hope to demonstrate the adequacy of my approach to the poetics of the final form of the David story in Samuel, and this chapter is as good an example as any.

7. "It was only a question." Heb. *davar,* can be read "It is only words!" as translated by Fox, *Give Us a King,* 88.

8. The biblical writer includes an explanatory sentence to reconcile the apparent disparity between the first meeting, which has David staying at court to comfort Saul with his harp, and the second meeting, which is preceded by David's coming in from the sheep fields to visit his brothers on the battlefield against Goliath and the Philistines: "David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father's sheep at Bethlehem" (17:15).

9. Twice we hear that David kills the giant, first with the stone and then with the sword. The assumption, then, is that the enemy is not quite killed by the stone itself.

10. "Claw" (New English Bible) is the more appropriate translation, for the NRSV "paw." In either case, *yad* has the connotation of power.

11. David Damrosch, for example, asks the obvious question about the "difference" of the Goliath episode within the immediate context. But he lacks methodological resources for answering, and so dismisses the episode as inconsequential. "Why has this incompatible story [David and Goliath] been inserted here? . . . The Goliath story as it now appears in I, 17 is a disruption of its context not only in terms of narrative flow but also in terms of genre. Amid the realistic descriptions of Saul's introduction to David in chapter 16 and David's early military successes in chapter 18, we are suddenly confronted with the story of the Giant–Killer. . . . As a narrative intrusion, it has no direct consequence at all. This is surprising, as the single combat against Goliath is presented as a decisive struggle." *The Narrative Covenant* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1971), 194, 195, 198.

12. With fine if not sufficiently nuanced insight, Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis points to the literary genius of the two meetings with Saul in establishing the story's back-and-forth dynamic between private and public: "The two accounts [of Saul's meeting David], however inconsistent they may seem, present us with two views of David at Saul's court and two views of Saul's relationship to David. In the first, he comes as Saul's personal musician, he calms him privately at court with his music and Saul loves him greatly; in the second, he becomes Saul's public champion, gradually, as depicted in the narrative, moving away from the private enclosure of his father's home, his sheep, his deliveries to his brothers, and into the public world of war and armor, visibility, wealth and influence. David has a private relationship with Saul the man; he also develops a public relationship with Saul the king. Saul the man can love his comforter and recall the refreshment brought to him by his music; Saul the king cannot bear to hear the Israelite women singing, 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands' (I, 18:7)." Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, ed., *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1982), 2:210.

13. David Gunn picks up nicely on these contraries. "Interconnection between the political and private themes," he points out, "exists at the more concrete level, as in the case of succession where David's roles as father and dynastic founder are obviously inextricably linked." *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation* (Sheffield, England: JSOTPress, 1978), 93. Gunn also notes the "modes" of David on the one hand as responsive-receptive-quiescent and on the other as initiator. "It can be argued that it is when David's mode of action is most attuned to giving that he is most successful. His grasping (especially in the Bathsheba scene), on the other hand, brings

in its train a series of disasters in both political and private spheres" (95). Gunn is too categorical, however, in suggesting that the text values one aspect of David over the other, as with this observation about "acquiring" the kingdom: "David, despite his obvious position of power, has made absolutely no attempt to seize by force the throne of Israel. . . . On the other hand," Gunn acknowledges, "David is far from being averse to the thought of gaining the kingdom" (95–96). Gunn helpfully highlights the playing out of what I have been talking about in the two Davids, the quiescent-receptive-private man and the aggressive-initiating-public man—insistent about which pole is presented in the text as better one.

14. Robert Polzin answers the mystery in categorical and, I think, wrongheaded terms. The overarching hypothesis of his two-volume interpretation of the David story is that anything appearing positive about David—especially popular appeal—can be deconstructed into the narrator's overall negative assessment: monarchy in Israel would be ruinous for postexilic Israel, as demonstrated in its supposed best, David. In David are the seeds of royal poison. *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History,* Part Two, 2 Samuel (Harper and Row: San Francisco, 1989); and, cited above: *David and the Deuteronomist* (vol. 3); I will have numerous opportunities to explore Polzin's thinking.

15. I, 16:13, God's spirit comes on David mightily; I, 18:1, Jonathan's soul is bound to the soul of David.

16. Scholars differ on the possibilities of this gesture by Jonathan. Some assume merely a pledge of loyalty and commitment, while others see the pledge as an implicit willingness to bestow kingdom rights. The latter fits the context of David's breathtaking appeal, while certainly helping to explain Saul's bitterness toward Jonathan's friendship with David.

17. What the traditional biblical scholar points out about various and sometimes contradictory sources is fairly clearly demonstrated here. Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis captures wonderfully the matter of a writer's use of such contrary sources. "Consider again our introduction to David. After he is anointed by Samuel, we are given two accounts of [David's] arrival at Saul's court and of his coming into contact with Saul. Scholars who write about these episodes point out that they are inconsistent, that Saul should not have to ask who David is after the slaying of Goliath. But surely whoever put the narrative into this final form was aware of the inconsistency too. The appearance of such inconsistent accounts in close proximity in a narrative is more than an author's nodding; it is the equivalent of deep sleep. Assume, then, that the author of Samuel has a reason for including two seemingly inconsistent accounts of David's coming into Saul's life. What, then, *is* the reason?" In Gros Louis, *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives,* 2:208.

18. Meir Sternberg has very nicely pointed to the gaps and silences and puzzles of biblical narrative that constitute an aesthetic demanding the audience-as-detective, the audience entering the drama in order to make sense of it. His subtitle to *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* expresses the point clearly: *Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading.* Such an aesthetic, Sternberg points out, is "a strategy of telling that casts reading as a drama, interpretation as an ordeal that enacts and distinguishes

the human predicament. . . . [I]nsofar as knowledge is information, the ubiquity of gaps about character and plot exposes to us our own ignorance: history unrolls as a continuum of discontinuities, a sequence of non sequiturs, which challenge us to repair the omissions by our native wit. . . . Insofar as knowledge consists in the relations between part and whole, the piecemeal, secretive storytelling makes at best for difficult unity. Far beyond the normal demands of interpretation and with no parallel in Oriental literature, therefore, the world and the meaning are always hypothetical, subject to change from one stage of the reading *process*. . . . [the narrative's] reading turns into a drama of understanding—conflict between inferences, seesawing, reversal, discovery, and all." *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative,* 46, 47.

19. Like Abraham, David is called on to journey, literally and figuratively. Abraham's initial choice to accept God's challenge involved clear directions to leave for an uncertain land. The first patriarch wanders not only as an ordinary nomad but also as a pilgrim seeking something morally better than he knows how to provide for himself or his wife Sarah. Having erred in a strikingly faithless manner, Abraham journeys toward such moral blamelessness that God can say at last, "*Now* I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son" (Gen. 22:12). Abraham had proven himself to God, finally, as morally ready by willingness to move beyond parochial clinging to family, son: "*Because* you have done this, and have not withheld your son . . . I will indeed bless you" (Gen. 22:15, 18). Similarly, when "the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David" his life changes from the simplicity of protecting sheep or even killing giants to the adventure of uncertain flight, troubling self-disclosures, and, finally, the need to relinquish a cherished son (I Kings 1; as I will show in chap. 6).

20. Abraham was challenged to "walk with [before] God, and to be (become?) blameless" (Gen. 17:1).

21. "As a step in the process of meaning of the Joseph story," Robert Alter goes on, "it is exactly right that the filial betrayal of Genesis 37 and the daughter–in–law's deception of Genesis 38 should be aligned with one another through the indirection of analogy, the parallels tersely suggested but never spelled out with a thematically unambiguous closure, as they are in the Midrash." *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 12.

22. David Gunn takes an opposing view of the matter by suggesting that Saul is set up, trapped, by divine directives: "If, looking back to Saul's anointing, we wait for God's command to David, we wait in vain. Where Saul's kingship had been immediately hedged around with provisions, David's is left open. No trap is set for the new king." *The Fate of King Saul* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1980), 78.

23. Another telling of David's story, one that leaves out the wrongdoing David of II Samuel, is found in I Chronicles, chapters 11–29.

CHAPTER 3

1. We may have been allowed something close to a peek into David's heart in the case of the relationship between David and Saul's son Jonathan. David escapes from

the royal court with help from Jonathan, who has sworn his soul and given his kingdom rights to David. They are together, in a scene of parting. David bows down to Jonathan three times, and then the two embrace, both weeping (I, 20:41). But we need to be careful; later in the story, we will see David weeping in dramatic contexts that suggest the possibility of posturing. David is capable of passionate displays that turn out to be theatrics—although in this present scene, there is a no audience for such theatrics, and it is difficult to picture David simulating tears. The text has not said here explicitly, though it will later confirm, that David loved Jonathan (II, 1:26).

2. "I have been a fool," Saul confesses to David after the second sparing incident (I, 26:21).

3. "Saul encounters various setbacks, from anxiety over his loss of prestige in the eyes of the people (II, 18:7) to his inability to apprehend David, and his fortune, not to mention his sanity, which deteriorates until the narrative reaches its lowest point with the vision of Samuel conjured up by the medium at En-dor." *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 22.

4. Baruch Halpern and Steven McKenzie, for example. The latter (see Halpern, below) takes it as axiomatic that such a strange tale as this chicanery on David's part—and his getting away with it—is a gloss of a so-called history of David's collaboration with the enemy Philistines. That is, we can read into the final form of the story obvious sources lying behind the text. "These sources bring us close to David historically. That is, whatever their date of writing, they seem to contain genuine historical information about David. It is hard to believe that they are pure fiction. Who would invent such allegations against David just to try to explain them away? Moreover, the events they relate have the 'ring' of authenticity: Saul, Nabal, Abner, and Ishbaal all died at times that were convenient for David's political career; Saul's line was obliterated at David's order; David lived as an outlaw and served the Philistines. The authors could not simply deny these events or ignore the suspicions they raised about David. The best they could do was take on the role of 'spin doctors,' explaining that David's motives were virtuous and his actions justified." *King David: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 35. Baruch Halpern has worked out what he thinks are two main sources, A and B: "One source (A) denies that David *ever* worked for the Philistines (1 Sam. 21:10–15 [11–16]). The other (B) stresses: (1) that Saul's persecution drove David to join the Philistines; (2) that David told his overlord, Achish of Gath, he was raiding Judah when he was really raiding desert camps; (3) that David joined the Philistines at the staging zone for their thrust into the Jezreel, but was detailed to the rear as bodyguard for Achish; and (4) that the other tyrants feared duplicity, and cited the snippet 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his myriads,' so that Achish sent him back home. In addition, (5) during the battle, David was off in the south chasing Amaleqites who had raided Ziklag in his absence; (6) when he learned from an Amaleqite, who brought him Saul's regalia, that Saul was dead, and at Saul's request by the Amaleqite's own hand, David killed Saul's killer; and (7) David composed a lament to mourn Saul's and Jonathan's deaths publicly (1 Sam. 24–2 Sam. 1). Protest? This is a dissertation of denial! But the alibi doesn't even completely

remove David from the battle: it admits he was in the Philistine camp, arrayed for war. It concedes that he was a trusted vassal of Achish, who did fight in the battle. It documents not that David killed Saul, but that the accusation that he helped the Philistines to victory had real sting." *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 78.

5. Is the audience uneasy about David's ruthlessness, his slaughter of innocent men and women? Does David's God countenance such? There will be occasion, later in this study, to briefly look at this issue.

6. Cheryl Exum, who occasionally interprets textual detail in the light of an interpretative scheme regarding the definition of "tragedy," suggests that inexorable fate is involved with Saul's demise and death once he errs: "Northrop Frye observes that tragedy demonstrates the inexorable workings of law, whereas comedy reveals the arbitrary activity of grace. Thus we speak of inevitable tragedy but not of inevitable comedy. . . . The demands of law operate unmercifully in the Saul story. Saul disobeys, and disobedience requires punishment. God shows Saul no compassion, and because God is unrelenting (God 'is not a man that he should repent,' says Samuel [I, 15:29]), Saul's demise is unavoidable." *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative,* 34. But so, too, with David! His "disobedience requires punishment" also (or, better, David must suffer the consequences of his wrongdoing). In the genius of this story and its implicit moral vision, David's doing wrong, though bringing destructive results, leads to the not-inevitable "comedy." It is difficult to see why, in Exum's scheme, David—the worse offender it would seem—maintains favor from the same God who apparently has decreed Saul's dire fate.

8. Baruch Halpern, governed always by his (probably correct) identification of two sources and by his conviction that the author's literary intention was a gloss of David's life, misses entirely the subtlety and point here. "One source (A)," he points out, "denies that David *ever* worked for the Philistines (I, 21:10–15 [11–16])." In Halpern's opinion, source (B), however acknowledges this fact but protests too much, suspiciously: in exonerating David the text (supposedly) implicates David. See the quotation in note 4 above from Halpern, *David's Secret Demons,* 78. Such an assurance of gloss may or may not be true (there is much intelligent guesswork in Halpern's study), but the deduction is quite beside the artistic point of David's cleverness of deception, revealed through paralleled and accumulated narrative detail, including a pattern that involves movement between what Halpern calls sources A and B.

9. "Jonathan's covenant with David is fundamental to him," Peter Ackroyd insists; "thereby he accepts the coming kingship of David. Such an acceptance of David counters any suggestion that he was a usurper on the throne. With this goes the assurance that David will not, like some kings of new lines (cp. the Jehu story in II Kings 9–10), wipe out the survivors of the preceding royal house. In fact, we are shown David angered at the death of Ishbosheth [Ishbael] (2 Sam. 4) and benevolent to Jonathan's son (2 Sam. 9). *The First Book of Samuel: The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 168.

10. "But one of the sons of Ahimelech son of Ahitub, named Abiathar, escaped and fled after David. Abiathar told David that Saul had killed the priests of the LORD. David said to Abiathar, 'I knew on that day, when Doeg the Edomite was there, that he would surely tell Saul. I am responsible for the lives of all your father's house. Stay with me, and do not be afraid; for the one who seeks my life seeks your life; you will be safe with me'" (I, 20–23).

11. About this matter of David insisting on taking sacred bread from the priest, Ackroyd offers helpful perspective: "These were the loaves, twelve in number according to Lev. 24:5, which were placed regularly in the shrine before the deity, and removed at intervals (Lev. 24:8 indicates that this was done each Sabbath) to be replaced by *freshly baked bread,* literally 'hot' bread. According to Lev. 24, only the priests could eat it (cp. Mark 2:23–8), but at an earlier time, as appears here, the only requirement was strict ritual cleanness. We may, however, detect here that this sacred bread is appropriate for the chosen king. A similar token is given to Saul after his anointing (10:4). . . . The story, like so many Old Testament narratives, is to be read at two levels. At one, it is a straightforward story of the fugitive David, skillfully getting food and a weapon for himself from the innocent priest. At the other, it shows how the priest of Saul himself acknowledges the coming king, offering protection and help, and it points the way into another event, the slaughter at Nob, which shows how unsuited Saul is for the royal position." *The First Book of Samuel,* 171–172.

12. The larger narrative context, however, indicates what the narrator will later make quite explicit: "David administered justice and equity to all his people" (II, 8:15). Robert Polzin offers this episode as a case in point for his overriding hypothesis of interpretation of David's story: "The controlled manner in which the Deuteronomist implicates David in the death of Saul from 1 Samuel 24 on [David flees from Saul, joining the Philistines under false pretenses of helping them], even as the narrative seeks continually to exonerate him from such a charge, is surely a powerful example of the History's artistic and ideological complexity. The History is profoundly double-voiced on the subject of David's own efforts to take possession of the crown that follows upon the LORD's anointing in 1 Samuel 16. Perhaps nothing illustrates how effectively the History gets this double message across better than the account of the spoils of David in 1 Samuel 30. Here David, having been left behind by the Philistines as they were preparing to do battle with Saul, is made to formulate a statute and an ordinance that suggests, in a marvelously effective way 'to this day,' David's unavoidable involvement in the death of Saul and in the coming fall of his house: 'As his share is who goes down into battle, so shall his share be who stays by the baggage; they shall share alike' (1 Sam. 30:24). That is to say, the Deuteronomist uses David's own words to implicate him in the death of the king whom he had twice refused to kill in 1 Samuel 24 and 26." *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History,* 4. Polzin's concern throughout his two-volume study of David's story in Samuel is to show two voices within the text: "the Deuteronomist," who consistently implicates David as prime example of Israel's having forsaken God, a voice at odds with the "narrator" (Polzin distinguishes "narrator"

from "writer")—*the narrative [that] seeks continually to exonerate him from such a charge,* as Polzin puts it (above). Polzin's reading consistently reveals important insight, but his essential project of pointing to how the text itself, as we have it, implicates David almost everywhere in the story emerges as quite suspect. Surely the slaughter of Saul's commander Abner and Ishbaal comes to mind as suspicious, but I think the problematic nature of Polzin's project can be illustrated in almost every case, and no better than, by the example above: clearly "the narrative seeks" (using Polzin's terminology) to establish both David's political foresight and his largesse. *The narrative seeks continually to exonerate him:* Polzin's assumption of the need for exoneration is based on what must be guessed, read into the text. In fact, it is on the basis of the I and II Samuel account that the writer of I and II Kings lifts David up as Israel's ideal king. In the end, the modern audience of the story must judge, with close attention to the informing patterns of the text, which I will continue to do.

13. Baruch Halpern repeats his claim, which—given two separate sources regarding David's relationship to the Philistines (a possibly valid historical conjecture)—overlooks what the final writer achieved with the help of these two presumed sources. "The claim of 1 Sam. 27 [source A] is that David remained among the Philistines for 16 months. During this time David told Achish that he attacked the south of Judah, and of the Jerahmeelite and of the Qenite. The latter two groups were on friendly terms with Israel. In fact, says the text, David attacked Geshurites, Gerizzites, and Amaleqites, all in the Negev on the border of Egypt. He left no survivors, so his overlord could not know that he was acting as a partisan of Israel. This is the dynasty's story [that is, a gloss]. It simultaneously denies that David attacked Judah and that he really, rather than ostensibly, worked for the Philistines. Yet the B source installs David as the head of Achish's bodyguard (1 Sam. 28:2). David arrives at Gath with two wives, Ahinoam the Jezreelitess and Abigail, 'the wife of Nabal, the Carmelitess' (1 Sam. 27:3). It is at this juncture, says the text, that Saul ceased chasing him. In effect, this is David's first historical, as distinct from literary, appearance. It is certain that he served Achish, because even the B source, which concedes the fact, is at pains to explain it away." *David's Secret Demons,* 287–288. My chapter 3 will explore a telling pattern that is located within this sequence is located, a sequence that accomplishes, literarily, quite the opposite from Halpern's assessment. Halpern's assessment that source B "is at pains to explain [David's service for Achish] away" misses the rhetorical purpose that insists on a comparison between the cleverness of David's handling of fear and the destructiveness of Saul's fearfulness. David's duping this Philistine ruler a second time (his dismissal as a madman being the first time) reveals ingenious capacities as a politico-warrior. The text is preparing us for the reign of one chosen by God, who, in comparison to Saul, is "the better man."

14. Attempts to interpret Saul's suicide from outside its literary context—the interlocking patterns of repeated detail regarding fear—can lead to wrongheaded and peculiar readings, like this from Lee W. Humphreys: "In the finale the separation of the constructive and the destructive is overcome. In clearly and boldly facing Israel's

certain defeat on Mt. Gilboa and his own death the fallen Saul attains new stature, and this is underscored by the final honors bestowed upon him in his burial by the men of Jabesh-gilead [20]. . . . In death Saul attains a stature that escaped him in life. He assumes some control over his fate by knowingly confronting it. He is no longer simply buffeted by forces he can neither comprehend nor control. He finds a stature and integrity that was his but briefly before. Here the narrative ends. The uncertain fears aroused by subtones in the introduction are now found to have been justified, but also justified is the deep admiration felt for this heroic figure." "The Tragedy of King Saul: A Study of the Structure of 1 Samuel 9–21," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 6 (1978): 20; 24.

The problem here is foisting on the text a paradigm that doesn't fit: the presumed "constructive and destructive" elements within Saul and his story. *In death Saul attains a stature that escaped him in life:* this eulogy Humphries offers is simply unwarranted by the narrative details as we find them orchestrated within their patterns of repetition.

15. One possible exception is the case of Pharaoh, examined in notes 1 and 2 here. We hear that God hardens the Pharaoh's heart but also that Pharaoh hardens his own heart: "Still Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to [Moses and Aaron]," Exodus 7:13; "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Pharaoh's heart is hardened; he refuses to let the people go,'" 7:22; "so Pharaoh's heart remained hardened, and he would not listen to them; as the LORD had said," 8:15; "But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite, he hardened his heart, and would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said," 8:19; "And the magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God!' But Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had said," 8:32; "But Pharaoh hardened his heart this time also, and would not let the people go," 9:7; "Pharaoh inquired and found that not one of the livestock of the Israelites was dead. But the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he would not let the people go," 9:12; "But the Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he would not listen to them, just as the Lord had spoken to Moses," 9:34; "But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he sinned once more and hardened his heart, he and his officials," 9:35. But then we find God hardening Pharaoh's heart, as if having had enough of what the text calls Pharaoh's willful sinning (9:35): see 10:1, 10:20, 10:27, 11:10, 14:8.

16. Before Moses encounters Pharaoh, God has announced to Moses the divine intention to "make him [Pharaoh] obstinate" (4:24, New English Bible). In the encounters between Moses and Pharaoh, God makes Pharaoh's heart dark, and goads him into mean-spirited action. But the other side of the coin is true, also, that Pharaoh hardens his own heart. For example: "But when Pharaoh saw that there was a respite [from dead frogs], *he hardened his heart,* and would not listen to them (8:13–15). But later, this: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Go to Pharaoh; for *I have hardened his heart* and the heart of his officials, in order that I may show these signs of mine among them'" (10:1). Which is it? "Let my people go," says God to Pharaoh by way of Moses, "so that they may worship me. *If you refuse* to let them go," the plagues will come (8:2; emphasis mine). Pharaoh is given choice of compliance or refusal. In the story of

David, Saul, and God, human will is a real thing: compliance or refusal are always options. For more on the Pharaoh paradox, see note 15, above.

17. *Exodus,* in the series *Interpretation* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1991), 99. See also 9:2 and 10:4, for the conditional "if." Fretheim comments, tellingly: "Decisions [Pharaoh] makes are related to his own stubbornness," just as Saul's response to his fearfulness is a capitulation in the face of possibility; "God . . . intensifies Pharaoh's own obduracy," just as Saul's descent into murderous jealousy is a combination of personal and divine choices (98).

18. *The Fate of King Saul* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1980), 115–116; see also 104.

CHAPTER 4

1. I Samuel, 18:11–24:1; specific reference to David's fleeing Saul occurs at 19:12; 19:18; 20:1; 21:10; 22:17; also (after the cave scene) I, 27:4.

2. To "cover the feet" probably includes both urination and defecation; taking the trouble of going into the cave indicates the latter. In either case, the feet are covered by the robe only in a squatting position.

3. Not told what exactly David is using here, we can assume a battle implement, a dagger.

4. Translation, Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999). "May God do this to me and more" is a serious oath, a willingness to be in the hands of an offended God.

5. *The Life of David* (New York: Shocken Nextbook, 2005), 37.

6. Translation by Rober Alter; *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel.* New York: Norton, 1999.

7. Stephen McKenzie's interpretive hypothesis, serving as an explanatory grid for all story details, insists on the apologetic nature of the text: its purpose is to whitewash an obviously flawed David. Such a monochrome grid yields the following tortured view, implying a clever propagandist but no artistic author: David *actually* (!) had Nabal killed while making off with his wife: "To grasp the apologetic nature of this material, contrast . . . Nabal and Abigail with the story about Bathsheba and Uriah. In both cases David was accused of having a man killed and stealing his wife. But the story of Bathsheba and Uriah is not apologetic." *King David: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 33. That McKenzie will have to explain the *un*apologetic nature of the Bathsheba and Uriah episode indicates a waffling: how is one to determine with any certainty the apologetic, if there is, in fact, unapologetic material? What we have, ignored for the most part by McKenzie in his hazarding of opinion, is a tightly crafted literary text with patterns that link the Nabal-Abigail and Bathsheba-Uriah epsiodes along entirely different lines, as I will show.

8. Peter D. Miscall purports to find a negative "tilt" in the narrator's evaluation of David, starting with the Nabal-Abigail episode. "It is 'easy' to see a 'good David' in [1 Samuel] chapters 16–24. In chapters 25–30, the portrayal has a tilt toward the negative pole, a 'bad David,' since it is 'easy' to see a brutal, unscrupulous David in

these stories, especially in chapters 25–27. However, it is a tilt, not a decision. We see in these chapters what David is capable of in the circumstances portrayed, which raises questions about his previous and subsequent actions and motivations. . . . In some respects, chapter 25 is a counter-point to chapter 24. Exercise of power or its restraint is at issue, and concern for the larger picture—David's future reputation—is the express motive for the restraint in regard to Nabal." *1 Samuel: A Literary Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 150. I have been demonstrating that, viewed from within the pattern of three sparings, there appears to be no "tilt" at all, no "bad David": sparing the Lord's anointed is one thing, sparing a boorish fool quite another—including the goodness of recognizing the bad outcome of bad behavior, a la the wisdom of Abigail.

9. Regina Schwartz is among those critics who find much that is sinister about David in this story, including this episode—the result, as she puts it, of two irresolvable traditions regarding David, a "Deuteronomistic pessimism" coupled with a King-David optimism. Schwartz offers a rather negative way to read the Nabal-Abigail episode: "David does not kill Nabal (Nabal conveniently drops dead just hearing of David's threat to him); instead, David takes Nabal's wife. The power gain is presumably equivalent. The fool's wife, Abigail, is no fool, and her way of acknowledging David's power is to collude in her own exchange, engaging in a seduction that is purely political—or should I say, politics is her seduction? 'And when the Lord has done to my lord according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you prince over Israel . . . and when the Lord has dealt well with my lord, then remember your handmaid' (1 Sam. 25:30–31). David remembers right away." "The Histories of David: Biblical Scholarship and Biblical Stories" in J. P. Rosenblatt and J. C. Sitterson Jr., eds., *"Not in Heaven"—Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 202. Schwartz speaks as if David's relationships with women were cut from a whole cloth, all Deuteronomistic pessimism: "It will turn out that David's seizures of other men's women—Abigail, Michael, and Bathsheba—are not all alike by any means, for they are not simply acts of garnering power from men who are in his way. Taken together, the three episodes of David's difficulty with such sexual exchanges demonstrate his difficulty as king, and perhaps they even demonstrate the difficulty of kingship for Israel" (203). I will demonstrate (in chapter 5) a complexity of David's relationship with Michal that prohibits any such cavalier lumping of her (not to mention Abigail) with the Bathsheba business.

10. Ignoring such contexts, David Gunn manages to paint Abigail and David as suspect, and Nabal as merely foolish but "unlucky," like Saul. "Abigail knows how to look after her own interests," he suggests. "Nabal's servants know how to look after *their* interests. Nabal, by contrast is indeed 'a fool [because he does not know how to look after his own interests]. . . . David's response [to Nabal's rebuff and taunt] is inevitable. He accepts Abigail's present, grants her petition and sends her back 'in peace.'" About Abigail's speech to David, Gunn goes on to dig beneath the obvious meanings: "Scratch the surface off this 'good' and 'evil,' however, [and] a rather different picture is revealed. These stark contrasts of good and evil are conveyed through some slippery rhetoric—rhetoric that is not necessarily motivated primarily

by a concern for the truth. Is Nabal's death a just reward for his rebuff to what he sees as the 'Mafiosi'? The narrative itself suggests not, not merely in the fact of Abigail's rhetoric, but through the contextual parallel with the slaughter of the priests of Nob. David is stopped only by the 'lucky' intervention of Abigail from aping the violence of Saul. Yet Yahweh in David's place strikes Nabal dead. . . . Abigail is 'good of understanding' in the sense of 'shrewd.' Nabal is indeed Nabal by nature as well as by name—at least in terms of the worldly wisdom that sets the standard in the story. He tangles with the wrong person. But *does he deserve to die?* It is the case of Saul all over again." *The Fate of King Saul* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1980), 100–101 (emphasis in original). To reduce David's choice to turn back from wanton slaughter as "inevitable"—the result of a "lucky" intervention by Abigail—and then to go on by positing a "lucky" David and an "unlucky" Saul is to ignore this episode's frame of David sparing Saul, complete with Saul's own confession of culpability and of David's extraordinary choice not to kill an enemy.

11. Halpern's concern with the "real David" and the history of sources lying behind the final form of the text leads him to guess that one version is earlier than the other, and that the later source omits and adds detail from the original: "In the B source version ([David behind enemy lines] I, 26), David steals a spear and water jug from beside the sleeping Saul. The spear indicates his ability to kill Saul, but the water jug represents a connection to the account in II, 23 [three warriors go behind enemy lines to secure for David water from the well of Bethlehem]. In the A source version (23:19–24:22[23]), David encounters Saul relieving himself in a cave, and cuts off the hem of his tunic. The A source version is slightly farther removed, in omitting the potable water and in introducing the humor of a scatological element, from the original episode." *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King.* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 266. The problem with such an approach is not in the valuable insight into possible histories (of David, of the text) but in the interpretive guesses that are unsupported by a patient hearing of entire patterns: that this detail was omitted, while another added—for purposes of scatological humor. More seriously, however, is the omission of how the triad of sparing stories works toward establishing one of the story's goals: a portrait of the very complex David. What Halpern misses here is the text's insistence on a character with a complicated but unified consciousness—not a consciousness "split" between one source and then a second source. Also missed is the synergy between political savvy (*I will not kill the Lord's anointed king*—which David will become!) and moral largesse: loving (not liking) not only an enemy who is God's raised-up one, but a low-life character, as Nabal evidently appears in David's eyes. That is, the story's "point" here—this revelatory moment of high drama and rigorous morality—is missing from the interpretive radar screen of an approach like Halpern's.

12. No such scene is conceivable in the closed-world epic of Homer. See the conclusion, and my "Story Shapes That Tell a World: Biblical, Homeric, and Modern Narrative," *Christian Scholar's Review* 9, n. 4 (1980): 1–39.

13. Joel Rosenberg emphasizes the political aspect of David's sparing Saul: "Curiously, David's very forbearance toward Saul has an element of political

calculation. On two occasions David chances upon an opportunity to kill Saul but refuses to stretch out his hand against 'YHWH's anointed' (*meshiah YHWH*). . . . Israelite custom had never accorded the anointed or charismatic leader a permanent and unconditional sacredness of person; the charismatic state ended with the cessation of battle or the death of the leader. David's usage . . . suggests that David foresees a dynastic function of kingship that goes far beyond the minimalist conception envisaged by Samuel. David knows that if Saul can be killed by an aspiring rival, any Israelite king can." "I and II Samuel," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible,* eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), 129.

14. Contrariwise, David Gunn presents a sustained attempt to portray Saul as a victim—of no less than God. "[Saul's] condemnation (rejection) is radically out of balance with the nature of his 'crimes.' His explanations and the evidence of his 'good faith' are conspicuously ignored. For a God who looks 'not on the outward appearance' but 'on the heart' (16:7), Yahweh takes a surprisingly superficial look at Saul's actions before 'repenting' and rejecting him. Saul's rejection is not intrinsically and inevitably the outcome of his actions." *The Fate of King Saul,* 124. Gunn is able to determine that Saul is set up by God as a scapegoat, since God is miffed that Israel wanted a mortal king rather than the divine one. "At the very outset, Yahweh is depicted as a jealous God" (125). "Expressed in terms of a story of character and action, however, Saul falls victim to Yahweh's resentment at an imagined insult (the 'sin') and becomes the pawn (or scapegoat) in a process (the 'expiation') whereby Yahweh vindicates his shift of attitude towards the monarchy and buttresses his shaken self-esteem" (128).

15. Again, Gunn: "The arbitrary disparity in God's treatment of the two figures is nowhere made more manifest than here at the very culmination of the story. The thematic statement is plain. Good and evil come from God. He makes smooth the path of some; the path of others he strews with obstacles. He has his favorites; he has his victims. The reasons, if reasons exist, lie hidden the obscurity of God's own being. Saul is one of God's victims." Ibid., 110–111. But to excuse Saul on the basis of God's fickle rejection (and arbitrary sending of an evil spirit) is to discount the narrative evidence for God's wise abandoning of a person ensnared by hopeless fear and jealousy—which make Saul's leadership, that for which God chose him, an abysmal failure (Saul's story ends in Israel's capitulation to the enemy and his own suicide—on the heels of his mounting campaigns against a potential champion of Israel, David). Is this a circular argument on my part, with uncertain cause and effect? Only the entire text, its patterns of repetition heard closely, will disclose the answer. God wants and needs one kind of leader, and one kind only: Saul is decidedly not that kind. Why God chose Saul in the first place remains a question the text is not interested in answering, however much the contemporary reader wants it answered.

16. Joel Rosenberg nicely points to two instances of someone intervening on David's behalf with God's word, but then wanders from the textual evidence—and dramatic point—in asserting God's univocal action at the expense of David's needed

response. "Here [with Absalom's revolt], as in 1 Samuel 25 [Abigail-Nabal]," Rosenberg claims, "David's fate is conspicuously beyond his control; it is divine intervention (through human agents) that saves him. However astutely David has handled his two exiles, the two critical turning points are not his doing but YHWH's. The placement of these two moments of abject vulnerability before YHWH as the centerpiece of their respective narrative cycles preserves for us the prophetic (that is, Samuelite) perspective on kingly power." Rosenberg, "I and II Samuel." 138. That an aspect of David's mystery is his "abject vulnerability before YHWH" does not, as I have been arguing, necessitate the view (as corollary) that "David's fate is conspicuously beyond his control." That is, just as God's response appears contingent on David's attitude and behavior, so too does David's "fate" depend on the merciful deliverance offered by the deity—as he himself confesses (nowhere so pointedly as in his long concluding poem, II, 22; chapter 8). Never does the story's God Function as puppeteer.

17. Speaking of Joab's death in I Kings, Wesselius describes what he sees as a multilayered reality that repeats itself as a pattern throughout the story: "Summarizing, we can say that there are motives for Joab's violent death on three different levels: first, there is the public reason why he deserved this verdict, secondly the personal motives behind it, and finally, on the deepest level, real justice is done and the divine plan is executed. We shall see that this pattern is not exclusive to this case, but that for most actions in the stories around King David such a threefold motivation can be discerned, which is indicated every time by means of various formal literary patterns." Jan-Wim Wesselius, *The Origin of the History of Israel: Herodotus' Histories as Blueprint for the First Books of the Bible* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 120. Such a sensitivity to "formal literary patterns" is the key, I am arguing, to perceiving the story's unity, cohesiveness, and power.

18. Robert P. Gordon is one of the few readers to provide a careful analysis of how the three sparing stories work as a literary pattern. He points out that scholars who see the Nabal incident as portending David's "fall" miss the literary positioning, and point: "All this, however, is only to disregard the function of 1 Samuel 25 within its immediate narrative setting. For from 24:1 to 26:25 we have a three-part plot in which there is incremental repetition of the motif of blood-guilt and its avoidance. . . . Manifestly, the suggestion that there is incremental repetition in these chapters assumes that David's actions in relation to Saul in the first and third scenes are qualitatively different. . . . Some corroboration of this view comes in the statement in verse 5(6) that '*David's heart smote him* because he had cut off Saul's skirt.' This is a strong statement which is used on only one other occasion—that of the census in 2 Samuel 24—to describe David's feelings of remorse (2 Sam. 24:10). Now one of the outstanding features of the census narrative is that David's action had deeper implications than were at first apparent. Such, it would seem, is the case in 1 Samuel 24:5(6). If our interpretation of the incident in the cave is correct then the contrast with the similar-sounding episode in 26:1–12 is not to be missed. David, having once violated the sanctity of the king's person—to put it no higher—shows not the slightest sign of weakness on the second occasion. Standing between these two

accounts is chapter 25, in which the whole issue of grievance, revenge and blood-guilt is played through to its conclusion. Thus David is given a preview of what will happen if he commits his case to God and leaves Saul unharmed." "David's Rise and Saul's Demise: Narrative Analogy in 1 Samuel 24–26," *Tyndale Bulletin* 31 (1980): 37–64, 54–55, 57.

19. Again, Joel Rosenberg: here he mistakenly finds the goodness of David's sparing Saul somewhat compromised—or at least peculiar.

CHAPTER 5

1. These are the tables of the testimony—covenant, Law—given Moses on behalf of the people by God. Num. 17:8 mentions the ark's contents as including, also, the budding rod of Aaron; Exod. 16:32 includes the golden pot of manna. On top of the ark was a "mercy-seat" for a direction-giving God; in battle situations, this mercy-seat became a "throne" for "the Lord of Hosts," Yahweh Sabaoth (Exod. 25:17–22).

2. Gen. 12:3: "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." I Kings 8:41–43: "Likewise when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so that they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built." In regard to the idea of covenant: from early in the Abraham story (Gen. 15:8) up through I and II Samuel, "covenant" and "covenantal" relates to this sense of God's fundamental loyalty to Israel and the corresponding expectation of God for faithful attention to the commandments and communal *shalom*.

3. Burnt offerings and sacrifice of communal well-being are a frequent tandem, the former focusing on the need for forgiveness, the latter an expression of thanks for *shalom*. Whenever there is sacrifice, there is an altar—whether explicitly mentioned or not. An altar could be a mound of earth, or a mound of unhewn stone. (A smaller altar, for incense offerings to God, was located in the interior of the tabernacle/tent and, later, in the Temple.)

4. *Scoundrels* is repeated in Judg. 20:13. The very worst characters of the David story are called *scoundrels:* the sons of Eli (I, 2:12); the incestuous rapist Amnon (II, 13:13); Shimei, who curses the Lord's anointed (II, 16:7); Sheba, rising up against the Lord's anointed (II, 20:1). This is as strong a word for a wicked person as exists: a *scoundrel* is "one who lives in a disorderly manner," or "*swallower,* equivalent to Sheol, the realm of the dead, which swallows up the dead, and so 'one who belongs to the alien powers of death and disaster.' " Peter R. Ackroyd, "The First Book of Samuel," in Ackroyd, A. R. C. Leaney, and J. W. Packer, eds., *The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 25.

5. See Gen. 19 for a parallel story of the same sort of gross inhospitality, though the similarities of the two scenarios highlight also the far worse character of what Israelites themselves are capable of, worse than even the Sodomites.

6. "In those days, the ark of the covenant of God was there, and Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron was its minister at that time" (Judg. 20:27–28). This earlier Phinehas (Phineas and Hophni, sons of Eli, are evil) is very special in Israelite history. God had said, "The priest Phinehas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron has deflected my wrath from the Israelites, he being the only one of them to have the same zeal as I have; for which reason, I did not make an end of the Israelites. . . . For this reason I say: To him I grant my covenant of peace" (Num. 25:11–12).

7. Note especially v. 35, "The Lord defeated Benjamin before Israel."

8. The three repetitions are framed by the total count, twenty-five thousand dead (Judg. 20:35 and 46).

9. Here begins a record of apparent sympathy between Jabesh-Gilead and Saul's tribe, Benjamin. As king, Saul gains a stirring victory on behalf of those from Jabesh-Gilead (I, 11:1–13). When Saul and his son die, "valiant" men from Jabesh-Gilead rescue the bones of the king and his son for burial in Jabesh-Gilead (I, 31:11–13).

10. The mention of idol worship is accompanied in two different cases by the key commentary *In those days, there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes* (Judg. 17:6, 18:1; and later, in the frame for the last sequence, 19:2 and 21:25). This narrative sequence, concerning Micah and the tribe of Dan, occurs immediately after Samson's miserable slide as a leader of Israel has ended with his suicidal death, in which the now-blinded judge is able to take many lives of the enemy along with his own (Judg. 16:28–31). A certain Micah returns silver taken from his mother; the mother uses the silver to make an idol. Micah then installs one of his sons as priest, to serve in his household shrine. "In those days," we read next, "there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judg. 17:1–6). The dark little story continues its spiraling downward. A Levite wanders by, looking "to live wherever he could find a place"—and finds Micah's house, with the shrine and the idol; "so Micah installed the Levite" (Judg. 17:7–13). The Levitical priesthood appears, in the laconic and understated manner of all biblical narrative, emphatically compromised. At the center of true priesthood are the ark and altar of sacrifice: here is something quite contrary, worship centering on not-God, an idol.

As a hinge between the foregoing and what is to follow—the entire tribe of Dan stealing Micah's idol (where will it end?)—we hear again, "In those days there was no king in Israel" (Judg. 18:1). This Danite episode, an extension of the Micah fiasco, immediately precedes the last sequence in Judges in which, as we have seen, the ark and altar no longer function beneficently. The frame functions to plead the narrator's case for the need of a king in Israel, a rhetorical point made all the more compellingly because of the words it echoes, from the preceding idol stories: *In those days there was no king in Israel and all the people did what was right in their own eyes.*

11. I will continue to note specific instances of Polzin's underlying view of the text's antimonarchic bias. For example, whereas I agree with Polzin about the parallels

between Eli and David, and their respective "houses," I think his collapsing the experience of David into that of Eli in terms of doom (even though "the sword shall never depart from [David's] house," says God, II, 7:10) is completely the opposite of what the parallel is intended to show—a point made especially clear in my next chapter, on failed fathers. Polzin, on the parallel: "Both Eli's house and its successor, Samuel's house, like the rich man in Nathan's parable, are stand-ins for royalty, especially David's." *David and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History,* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 3:44.

12. J. C. Brown Harris and M. Moore discuss this "focus upon the ark of the covenant," which they call "vital," since "the ark represented God's covenant commitments to Israel, as well as theirs to God and each other. Significant, too, is the reference to Phinehas; for he had already proven himself as 'zealous for the honor of God' in purging evil from the people of Israel (Numbers 25:7–13)." *New International Bible Commentary* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2000), 280–281. What this doesn't answer is the context of utter communal chaos, which I have suggested is so horrific as to render the ark, the good priest Phinehas—and even God's directive—null and void.

13. *Apprentice priest,* I, 2:11, 18; 3:1 (Samuel is never called *priest,* though he performs sacrifices); *seer,* I, 9:5–14, 18–21; and *prophet,* I, 3:20; words of judgment, *judge,* I, 7:15; 13:13–14; 15:17–19, 22–23. We have seen that Saul functions, early on, as a judge-like victor over an enemy (chapter 1).

14. This sacrifice of communal well-being was to provide festival food for all the major players of the covenant: God, priests, and people.

15. The sons of Eli insisted, "by force" if need be, on getting the meat for themselves before the fat was burned (I, 2:15–16): "Failure to *burn the fat,* the part of the sacrifice regarded as specially belonging to God, is seen as an even worse crime," Ackroyd comments. "The fat should be removed first, and the implication is that these priests at Shiloh had so little regard for proper practice that they even dared to take what they wanted before what should be given to God had been removed." *The First Book of Samuel,* 34.

16. Eli judges, though he is never called "a judge"; so, too, Samuel (see I, 7:15 where the verbal and not the nominal is used). However, Samuel appoints two unworthy sons as "judges" (I, 8:1). The last fully-realized judge, then, appears in the book of Judges—another pre-monarchal indicator of the waning twilight in Israel when judges dominated.

17. "She called the new baby 'Iy-kabod,'" suggests Walter Brueggemann, "that is, 'Where is the glory?' The familiar translations of the name give answer to the question; but in fact she only asks the question in the name, 'Where?' The answer, given in the next clause, is 'Nowhere! Not here . . . The glory is gone!'" *Ichabod toward Home: The Journey of God's Glory* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 8.

18. *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999).

19. "Rejoice" rather than "looked into" is the preferred translation for many modern editions, including JEB, NRSV, and Alter (*The David Story*). The liter-

ary symmetry between this account and what happens later with Michal's lack of rejoicing adds credence to the translation.

20. "To whom will it [the ark] go?" (P. Kyle McCarter, v.1, 131–132), or, "to whom will He go up away from us?" Robert Alter has this note: "The Hebrew could equally be construed as 'will it go up,' referring to the ark." *The David Story,* 35.

21. On its way back from the Philistines, the ark comes to rest at Kiriath-jearim (called Baale-judah here), just east of Philistine territory but west and south of Gibeon, where it conceivably would find a proper home. David's captured Jebusite city, now "the city of David," Jerusalem, is strategically located at the heart of Israel: the northernmost part of Judah, at the boundary between Judah and the northern tribes.

22. Among them, Lyle Eslinger—who builds a case for the presumably exclusive desire on David's part for his own power in offering a "house" for the ark, rather than the traveling tent/taberncle (11, 7:1–3; Nathan, the trustworthy prophet, thinks David's suggestion a good idea). "What David does with the ark in 2 Samuel 6 [bringing it "home" to Jerusalem] is an important context for interpreting his rhetoric in 2 Samuel 7. Until God dissuades him, the ark is the focus of his attention in both chapters. In 2 Samuel 1–5 David goes about the business of securing his throne, but only from chs. 6–7 do we get any insight into his plans for including God and 'religion' in his administration. The kingship sewn up (5.10, 12, 13, 25; cf. McCarter 1984:175), David makes a public show of the deity's approbation for king and royal city and, implicitly, seeks a stronger hold on the ark and perhaps on the deity too. . . . 2 Sam 6.9 gives a slim but revealing glimpse into David's motives . . . David wants the ark not for its or anyone else's benefit: having it in Jerusalem suits the royal ambition." *House of God or House of David: The Rhetoric of 2 Samuel 7* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1994), 14. The "slim but revealing glimpse into David's motives" comes, in Eslinger's estimation, from this verse: "David was afraid of the Lord that day [Uzzah has been struck dead for putting his hand out to steady the cart-held ark]; he said, 'How can the ark of the Lord come into my care?'" *House of God,* 15. I deal with this episode elsewhere in this chapter: presumably Eslinger is focused on "into my care." But how else can it be for Israel's leader to take such responsibility? David's fear is an appropriate and laudatory response: he certainly should be afraid. The next time around, in transporting the ark, he does it correctly, in the Levitically prescribed way, having it carried by poles.

23. Expressed by the narrator, reporting on David's intentions; such revelation is more reliable—is completely reliable—over against any recorded speech by David (II, 6:20).

24. Polzin, in his insistence of a negatively portrayed David, takes Michal's cursing at face value: "If kings are easy to curse, the [Deuteronomistic] History shows that David, of all Israel's kings, is the easiest one of all. No sooner is David anointed king in I, 16, than Goliath curses him, 'And the Philistines cursed David by his gods' (II, 17:43). When David brings the ark of the LORD to Jerusalem in triumph, Michal's reproach provokes him to respond, 'I shall make myself even more accursed than this (*unqaloti 'od mizzo't*)' (II, 6:22). From then on in II, attention to

cursing focuses exclusively upon Shimei's cursing of David (II, 16:5, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13; 19:21). In his confrontation with Shimei, as with Michal in II, 6, David gives what appears to be something like an authorial interpretation of such cursing. David rebukes Abishai, 'Let [Shimei] alone, and let him curse; for the LORD had bidden him' (II, 16:11). Clearly, David is no longer the man after God's own heart." *David and the Deuteronomist,* 3:164.

On the contrary, Goliath is an enemy of Israel and Israel's God: the giant's cursing implies the corollary, blessing from David's and Israel's God. Further, regarding Michal: she is herself cursed, as I have suggested, so that her curses cancel out in the same way as Goliath's; David's openness to the curses of Shimei, as being possibly from God, reflects the king's capacity of self-critique, an imperfect man willing to entertain just that fact.

25. Halpern, in keeping with his generally negative assessment of David's character as narratively presented, suggests the following: "In the narrative, David rejects Michal, Saul's daughter, because she has some objection to the ceremony in which he introduces the icon to the capital. Possibly, this reflects uneasiness with the ark itself among Saul's constituency. . . . It at least takes advantage of this uneasiness—Saul's distance from the ark—to suggest that Michal was unwilling to welcome the ark on David's terms." Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons,* 333. I am arguing that "David's terms" happen to correspond, in the narrative, with God's terms.

26. "And Michal the daughter of Saul came out to meet David and said:

A How *honourable* was the king of *Israel* today
B in that he uncovered himself today in the eyes of the handmaids of his servants
C as one of the low fellows *shamelessly uncovers himself*
D And David said to Michal, *it was before the Lord* who chose me before your father and before all his house
X to appoint me prince over the people of the Lord, over *Israel*
D′ Therefore will I play *before the Lord*
C′ and *I will yet be more lightly esteemed* than this,
B′ holding myself lowly in my own eyes: and of the maidservants of whom thou hast spoken;
A′ of them shall I be had *in honour.*

Pivot Patterns in the Former Prophets (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 152.

At the center of the chiasm, or "pivot pattern," are David's words *To appoint me prince over the people of the Lord, over Israel,* indicating, as Klaus notes, "that this is the point of greatest gravity in [David's] curt reply to Michal, daughter of Saul, the previous king" (167–168). And this shrewd comment: "David maintains that he is only a *prince* over the people of the Lord, over *Israel.* . . . By using this appellation he expresses a clear attitude to Saul her father, in whose appointment and designation the

words *chosen as a prince over Israel (his people)* are the same as the language used regarding David" (160–161).

27. Many have noted the political expediency of returning the ark. Cheryl Exum, for example, states what she assumes to be the prime if not only motivation of David in returning the ark: "In 2 Samuel 6, David twice seeks to bring the ark of the covenant of Yhwh to Jerusalem, a move that lends religious authority to his newly established kingdom." *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 85. C. L. Seow suggests a more nuanced view: "The procession [of the ark returning] was itself propagandist in that it publicized at once the successes of David and the failures of Saul. The ark had fallen into oblivion in the days of Saul, and the cult was neglected. But through the pious initiative and commitment of David, publicly demonstrated in the procession, the ark was given its due place of prominence." "Myth, Drama, and the Politics in David's Dance," in *Harvard Semitic Monographs,* edited by Frank Cross Moore (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 201. "It has long been recognized," Seow begins, "that the transfer of the ark into Jerusalem was a pivotal event in the history of Israelite religion and politics. Scholars hail David's initiative as a brilliant maneuver that effectively galvanized the loose confederation of Israelite tribes into a monarchial state" (1). R. P. Gordon is clear on what is almost always the dual possibility in David's story of political goals in sync with pious and God-desired goals: "a judicious reading between the lines," Gordon points out, must pay attention to a complementary truth: "we have to allow that the biblical text speaks of God's desire to enhance David's glory as if David's intention had been transparently honourable from the onset." *1 and 2 Samuel* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 73. I have been developing the notion that the text builds on precisely this possibility, that David's political maneuvering and his devotion to God can be simultaneous truths—in fact, mutually reinforcing truths.

28. Among the interpretive problems of solving the mystery of David is that of a too-rigid interpretive grid. In an often suggestive feminist critique, for example. Lillian R. Klein finds in Michal's window-viewing an echo of the prior escape by David from a window that was assisted by Michal. Ignoring the larger patterns that govern, she deduces the following: "The contrast of this scene at the window with the earlier window scene [David's escape] is notable. In the earlier scene, Michal represents the royal family as daughter of Saul, and David is the powerless son-in-law. In the later scene, David *is* royalty—the king—and Michal is merely one of the several wives. The window which provide David freedom and saved his life became a window which confines Michal, evidenced by the bitter tone of her words." "Michal, the Barren Wife," in Athalya Brenner, ed., *Samuel and Kings: A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 43. "A window which *confines?*" Such carelessness with narrative detail—Michal would seem to have chosen the window post—results from undue guidance by one's interpretive lens or bias (which we all wear, requiring a most vigilant attention to the text in its coherence and unity; attention to the story's own patterns of repetition, as I do in this study, helps a great deal in letting the text itself guide us).

29. "And you shall put the poles into the rings on the sides of the ark, by which to carry the ark. The poles shall remain in the rings of the ark; they shall not be taken from it. You shall put into the ark the covenant that I shall give you" (Exod. 25:14–16). See Exod. 37:5, 40:20.

30. So Everett Fox: "The Coffer's return [from the Philistines] . . . does not provide a full solution as far as [the Israelites] are concerned. . . . Not until David shows concern about its whereabouts, and brings it to his new capital, Jerusalem, will the kingship be established on a firm footing, with apparent divine approval." *Give Us a King: Samuel, Saul, and David* (New York: Schocken Books, 1999), 4.

31. "The 'ritual procedure' explanation of Uzzah's death," Marti J. Steussy argues, "presumes a rational God acting according to clear rules. Here I believe we see something different—the warning of a mysterious, even dangerous quality to God's presence, a power which must always be approached tentatively and never presumed upon." *David: Biblical Portraits of Power* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 60. I think the tendency to ascribe divine inscrutability in the face of a mysterious text often does no justice to the subtlety of a text intent on elucidating, not hiding, the thinking of God.

32. Robert Polzin insists on the opposite, that "the glory somehow departs from Israel when the ark of God is taken up in behalf of kingship." Polzin manages this conclusion, based on his interpretive assumption of an antimonarchal, anti-David stance of the narrator: "Michal's childlessness may represent the Deuteronomist's hope that the glory would one day return to Israel, and that Israel, like Michal, would remain kingless before the LORD to the day of her death." *David and the Deuteronomist,* 3:71.

33. David's refusal to use the ark for personal protection echoes, as a reverse corollary, the problem of the ark's loss and Israel's defeat back with Eli's sons. It was customary for the ark to accompany Israel in battle, but included in the evil of the accompanying sons, it would appear, is a presumption of good luck charm. "Given that Yahweh is in control," P. Kyle McCarter asks about the Eli-ark scene, "why has he permitted this defeat . . . and the capture of his ark? The answer to this question, as Miller and Roberts have shown, is to be found in the account of the corruption of the Shilonite priesthood in II, 2:11–26, or rather in the parts of that account that belonged originally to the ark narrative (II, 2:12–17, 22–25). The ark was captured because Yahweh had chosen to abandon Israel on account of the wickedness of the Elides. The details in vv 4b and 11b are essential, not incidental remarks of the narrator, and the report to Eli that follows makes the point clear." *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 8:109. David's respect for the ark is in polar opposition to the attitude toward the ark in the prior episode involving Eli's sons—with consequences directed by God in each case that indicate not only divine control, as McCarter suggests, but human responsibility in how events turn out.

34. The brutality of David toward neighboring peoples will be touched on in the conclusion.

35. Immediately preceding the Bathsheba fiasco, David is shown establishing peace with foreign antagonists through military might (II, 10:19). To miss the

narrator's arrangement here by focusing on the history of sources can lead to misjudgment about the final form of the text. Randall Bailey, for example, purports to have discovered "that there are historical allusions to events within II, 10–12 which presuppose events described in II, 13–20," which may well be true. The problem is in making interpretive judgments—quite wrongheaded—about the final form of the text on the basis of a methodology not at all suited for doing so: "The above analysis [of sources arranged unchronologically] has demonstrated that the narratives in II, 10 tend to glorify David and his administration in a somewhat mocking manner. In this way, they appear to critique the materials in II, 8, which glorify David's prowess in establishing the empire. In this unit, as we have shown, there is a skepticism which seems to argue that it was only when provoked that David entered battle. Similarly, they tend to critique motifs which may have been central to the late Davidic claim to reestablish the Davidic empire through military might and conquest. Thus, the literary reversals are, as we have argued, stylistically devised to turn accepted traditions on their head." *David in Love and War* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 80.

36. As I will show in chapter 6, David's blindness is emphasized ironically by a wise woman who credits David, at a particularly low point of his dealings as a father, with the perspective of an angel, "discerning good and evil"—then, twisting the dagger of irony to a hyperbolic degree, ascribing to the doting and passive father "wisdom of the angel of God to know all things that are on earth" (II, 14:17, 20).

37. *The Life of David* (New York: Shocken Nextbook, 2005), 139.

38. With his usual close attention to the text, J. P. Fokkelman elaborates on the narrator's valuation of David's action here: "David sends the Ark back in the surprising gesture of renunciation. He does not wish to build falsely on the presence of this mobile sanctuary during his wanderings. Then he relies on God's grace and in 25d formulates his own return exactly in parallel with that of the Ark." *King David.* in *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel.* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 1:186.

39. David here includes Joab: *sons* of Zeruiah—as if to say, my world of moral vision differs from that of yours.

40. Consistent with his hypothesis of a ubiquitously condemned David, Robert Polzin gets the parallel backward, I think. "Is it a coincidence," he asks, "that II, 15, like I, 4:1–7:2, involves the leaving and returning of the ark from and to its rightful place? Or that two priests and their two sons accompany the ark in 2 Samuel 15, while Eli's two sons accompany the ark in I, 4?" *Samuel and the Deuteronomist,* 2:62. Polzin is shrewd in his observation of the parallel, but he misses the ark-altar pattern in its entirety, which challenges his judgment that as the ark suffers in the Eli episode, so, too, with David. David's refusal to take the ark along in the first place and the refusal's salutary outcome contrast completely with the taking of the ark by the two sons of Eli and the taking's very sorry outcome.

41. Kyle P. McCarter picks up on the same parallelism, and its rhetorical point—and articulates the "passivity" of David's character (for good and for ill) that I have been suggesting: "[The narrator] is fashioning a structure of responsibility, blame, and divine censure that becomes increasingly visible as the story goes along. In David's attitude toward the disposition of the ark and the chief priests we see a

king prepared to submit fully to the divine will. We can speak of David's trust in Yahweh if we want. The main point, however, seems to be his resignation to Yahweh's will, whatever it may be. 'Let him deal with me as seems best to him!' he says (II, 15:26). . . . This attitude is reinforced by the narration of the Shimei incident, in which David again shows himself ready to submit to whatever Yahweh has in store. In this case the king's resignation is set in high relief by the contrasting example of one of the always precipitate sons of Zuriah. As at other times, 'David is prepared to allow that the kingdom is not his to grasp or cling to but lies in the hands of other to give' [Gunn 1978:102]. Again this passivity on David's part guides the reader to his own judgment: Events will show what Yahweh has in mind." *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 9:375.

42. The communal well-being here is of an ambiguous order: a wise woman prevents bloodshed between Saulides and Judah by demanding and getting the head of the troublemaker Sheba, whereupon "all went to their homes"—followed by a note that, in citing his administration, suggests the orderliness of David's restored reign.

43. Solomon's prayer in the assembly of all Israelites goes on to include words that appear quite ominous for the audience of the text, if not for the people of Israel themselves: "When your people Israel, having sinned against you, are defeated before an enemy but turn again to you, confess your name, pray and plead with you in this house, then hear in heaven, forgive the sin of your people Israel, and bring them again to the land that you gave to their ancestors" (I Kings 8:33–34). The king's anticipation of the worst soon happens, as the remaining chapters of I and II Kings make clear. The sinning will outdistance the seeking of forgiveness, and the covenantal hope of communal well-being is lost.

44. "I will make of you a great nation," says God, "and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). Genesis could have been committed to writing after David's story, which would make the kind of thought Solomon uttered influential for the Genesis writer.

45. Narrative representations of God's determining, or ordaining, are infrequent in Jewish Scripture, and almost always coupled with—contingent on—human response: God's steadfast love is forever, and determines an ultimately good outcome for Israel and the human prospect, but the derailing of immediate fulfillment is very frequent. The implicit suggestion here and elsewhere in Jewish scriptural narrative is what seems to me the always-present contingency of covenant fulfillment on appropriate human response, although the long-range determination of God to provide a blessing for all peoples (Gen. 12:3) remains a divinely determined goal. Even God's promise of an everlasting dynasty to David, for example (I, 7) is qualified, apparently, by Solomon's prophetic understanding of the always-present though often-buried "if" of appropriate human response (I Kings 8). Poetic reflection, with its tendency to hyperbolize, is another matter: see, for example, Psalm 89:19–37, wherein we find a God promising an everlasting dynasty for David (v. 29) even if the human response falters (vv. 30–37).

46. David Orton allows that "The purpose of the story of the Ark (4.1b–7.1) is to show how the superiority of Yahweh is revealed in his Ark," but then goes on to claim that "it has, however, nothing to do with the Samuel story itself, within which it is set. Though we might be able to do without it here, it does form the significant background story for 2 Samuel 6, where the further fates of the Ark are related in the context of the story of David. The author has thus inserted it for a purpose. In the following section, which is externally connected to the story of the Ark by 7.2, Samuel again is in the foreground." *Narrative and Novella in Samuel: Studies by Hugo Gressman and Other Scholars* 1906–1923 (Sheffield, England: Almond Press, 1991), 122.

CHAPTER 6

1. "There was a certain man of Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. He had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts at Shiloh, where *the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord*. On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb" (I, 1:1–5; emphasis mine).

2. That is, if the Hebrew rather than the Christian canon is followed (Christian canon interrupts with The Book of Ruth on the basis that it contains reference to David's lineage).

3. We first hear of such a communal celebration in Exod. 20:24; it is spelled out in Lev. 7:11–18; it is the sacrifice at the center of David's communal celebration at the return of the ark (II, 6:17).

4. See II, 8:17; 15:24; I Kings 1:8; 2:35.

5. There is no warrant to go so far as J. P. Fokkelman in determining the dynamic between a true love and this father's love and subsequent inaction: "Although we hear of David that 'he became very angry,' no actions follow. The rage masks powerlessness. In this case, his powerlessness can be explained on the basis of awkwardness and embarrassment aroused in David by the discovery that he had been misled when he did Amnon a favor in sending Tamar to visit him. But below this lies an even more fundamental embarrassment and powerlessness, that of a father who cannot be a match for his spoiled and/or ambitious sons." *King David,* in *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel,* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981), 1:112–113. How exactly the psychology of the father works in the David story is left open, perhaps purposefully in order to emphasize myriad ways in which something looking like love can be quite destructive.

6. Through Nathan, God has told David, concerning Solomon, "I will not take my steadfast love [*hesed*] from him, as I took it from Saul" (II, 7:15). *Hesed* appears frequently in the David story as characterizing God's love, and David's also. Nelson Glueck offers a summary in his *Hesed in the Bible:* "*A,* God's *hesed* can only be

understood as Yahweh's covenantal relationship toward his followers. *B,* Only those who stand in an ethical and religious relationship to Him may receive and expect His *hesed.* *C,* God's *hesed* corresponds to the demands of loyalty, justice and righteousness. . . . *H,* The significance of *hesed* can be rendered by 'loyalty,' 'mutual aid' or 'reciprocal love'" (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967), 102. Glueck probably overstates the matter with "only those who" (*B*), though admittedly *hesed* ultimately implies a reciprocal loyalty on the human side. David himself, of course, demonstrates *hesed.* For a view challenging the centrality of *hesed* as descriptive of the covenantal relationship, see K. Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of "Hesed" in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry,* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2002),

7. "And the man, the master of the house, went out to [the scoundrels] and said to them, 'No, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Since this man is my guest, do not do this *vile thing* [*nebalah*]'" (Judg. 19:23). *Nebalah,* sacrilege, is a "serious, disorderly, and unruly action resulting in the breakup" of social order and communal well-being (as in the case of any active presence of *scoundrels.* See A. Phillips, "*NEBALAH*—a Term for Disorderly and Unruly Conduct," *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1975): 241; also P. Kyle McCarter's note on these verses in *The Anchor Bible: I Samuel* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 9:322–323. Committing *nebalah,* Tamar pleads with the rapacious Amnon, will make you *as one of the scoundrels in Israel.* The Mosaic Law proscribes that such a person is to be cast out from the society whose harmony has been threatened (Lev. 18:26–30).

8. Between Geshur and the conquered Ammonites south of Geshur; II, 10:17–19.

9. The translation here is notoriously difficult because of the uncertainty of the preposition *al:* toward? against? on? Fokkelman claims *against* as "the correct translation": "David longed intensely to march out against Absalom, for he was grieved about Amnon, that he was dead. Joab now, the son of Zeruiah, discerned that the king was ill-disposed toward Absalom" (*King David,* 1:126–127). I think this is particularly unwarranted within the context of David's passivity, his wavering regarding actions to take with wayward sons. McCarter captures this sense beautifully: "It is erroneous to suppose that this [construction] implies that David is now favorably [or unfavorably] disposed towards Abishalom [Absalom]. The meaning is rather that Joab selects a time when he knows that David is thinking about Abhishalom, trying (presumably) to decide how to handle the matter." *II Samuel, The Anchor Bible,* 344.

10. Through a rather complex and somewhat cumbersome gathering of methodologies, Larry L. Lyke manages a conclusion that is, I think—as should be clear from my exploration—far from the mark. There are many interpretations of the tale, Lyke concludes. "But the number of interpretations is not entirely indeterminate. The possible interpretations are persistently bounded by the strictures implied by the legal and theological insights embedded in the various literary forms that comprise the greater *mashal* [parable-like tale embedded in a larger narrative]. It is highly unlikely that any single author or redactor 'controlled' all these messages simultaneously, any more than David or any reader could. But this is the heart of the

religiously over-determined message implied in the Tekoite's *mashal:* interpretation is everything." "King David with the Wise Woman of Tekoa," in *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament,* David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies, eds., (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 191–193. It is precisely that interpretation I am after, a hearing not far from an ear that is attentive to the text and its patterns.

11. Uriel Simon, for example: "Through the medium of the juridical parable David was given the opportunity of displaying uninhibited mercy towards the mother of a son who had murdered his brother at a time when he still did not yet dare to show mercy to himself." "The Poor Man's Ewe-Lamb: an Example of a Juridical Parable,"*Biblica* 48 (1967): 225. But his "mercy" is clouded, at the very least, by precisely what he cannot do for himself at this point—treat himself, or Absalom, with either mercy or justice.

12. For example, Stephen McKenzie's reliance on the assumption of "apologetic" for interpreting the entire story, leads to failure in understanding David's compassion here as a negative. "Permitting the prince to return [in response to the Tekoa widow's tale] was a big mistake in the long run. In the writer's perspective, it let a moral wrong go unpunished and left 'innocent' blood unrequited. But again the writer's concern was to show both that David was not primarily responsible for this error and that even if he erred it was on the side of compassion and tenderheartedness, not of the violence of which he was accused." *King David: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 164.

13. McKenzie, for example, offers a judgment that David as father is being portrayed throughout the story as gentle (a good thing) and, with Absalom, intent on bringing justice to bear: "It took David three years to get over Amnon's death—another sign of how much he loved him [confirming a good David, a gentle David]. Only then did he permit Absalom, who had fled to his grandfather's kingdom of Geshur, to return to Jerusalem (13:38–39). The writer's point here has often been misunderstood because of the mistranslation in v. 39. It is usually translated along the lines of the NRSV: 'the heart of the king went out, yearning for Absalom.' This is taken to show David's continuing affection for his son and longing for his return. But if this was the case, why did Joab have to concoct the ruse in chapter 14 to convince David to permit Absalom to return? And why even then did David refuse to allow Absalom into his presence? The verse is better read 'the spirit of the king was spent for going out against Absalom.' In other words, the writer claims that David was so angry with Absalom for killing Amnon that he tried for three years to capture him. Only then did his anger abate sufficiently to consider allowing Absalom to return home. David was gentle but not unjust; he did not intend to permit even his own son to get away with murder." Ibid., 163. The precise opposite, as I am demonstrating, is the case at a number of points. David does not try to go after his son (there is no mention of it, even though the geographical distance separating father and self-exiled son is not very great), and rendering justice is precisely what the narrative, through the failed-fathers pattern, has been trying to establish. David the father, then, is obsessive in his "love," to the detriment of David the king and his ability to rule God's people.

14. Bruce Birch, in a note on II, 19:8a, comments: "To his credit, David gathers himself and takes a seat in the gate, presumably as a sign of support and welcome to his returning and victorious warriors (v. 8). Word of this royal presence passes among the troops, and they gather around the king for whom they have fought. We cannot imagine that the grief we have glimpsed is assuaged, but in the necessities of the moment, the king takes the place of the father." *First and Second Samuel,* in *The New Interpreters Bible,* vol. 2 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1998). The narrative question, as I will show, is the staying power of this "moment" where David the king is able to put David the father in his proper place.

15. "I shall be a father to him [Solomon], and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings" (II, 7:5, 14).

16. David Gunn, along with a host of other scholars, assumes that after the Absalom affair, "the king ceases to be king. From this point on he is simply and essentially man"—and nowhere more so than in the Adonijah-Solomon affair of early 1 Kings." *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1978), 58. Such views ignore the fact that David is resurrected as king immediately following Joab's reprimand about the unseemliness of the king's sobbing. David resumes his kingly role, at the gate, and goes on, as I am arguing, to a reversal of pathetic fathering in the direction of responsible leadership, with the refusal of Adonijah's aspirations to be king. (More on this in the following chapter.)

17. Citing a key assessment of the narrator, Cogan comments on what we have seen: "1 Kings 1:6, '*Yet his father never once caused him displeasure*': the narrator's remark explains Adonijah's present behavior as due to his father's indulgence throughout 'all his life' (*mymyw*). "I Kings," in *The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 157.

18. "Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up for himself a pillar that is in the King's Valley, for he said, 'I have no son to keep my name in remembrance'; he called the pillar by his own name. It is called Absalom's Monument to this day" (II, 18:18). In a mostly wonderful reading of the David-Absalom dynamic, Charles Conroy has it wrong, I think, in his insistence on viewing this reference to monument building by Absalom exclusively as the narrator's attempt to insert historical explanation, however inappropriate to the narrative sequence. "It is sometimes said," Conroy suggests, "that the effect of the surprising shift back to Absalom's lifetime in v. 18 [the scene involves Joab's disposal of Absalom's corpse] is to set up a sharp contrast between the proud monument he had erected for himself and the shameful heap of stones in the forest under which his torn corpse now lies [see I, 16–17]. This explanation does not quite fit, however, for the original point of v. 18 is not to describe the splendour of Absalom's monument but to explain what connection a well-known monument in the King's Valley has with Absalom." *Absalom! Absalom! Narrative and Language in 2 Sam. 13–20*. Analecta Biblica 81 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 65. Rather, it appears that this is a reinforcement of the point regarding Saul: like Saul, Absalom is presumably insecure, wanting, perhaps, an assurance that his line will continue. In each instance, Saul's and Absalom's, the mention of

monument building would seem apropos of nothing in the immediate narrative context, unless we take into account the paralleled and profound anxiety shared by Saul and Absalom that contributes to their respective downfalls. I think the juxtaposition of stone-heap and stone-pillar/monument in the Absalom instance supports this narrative point.

19. Solomon will banish Abiathar, presumably for having sided with Adonijah: "this then is the 'one man,'" comments McCarter, "spared at Yahweh's altar 'to wear out his eyes and use up his strength,' of whom the man of god foretold in the oracle in 2:27–36 [1 Sam, regarding the fall of the Eliade dynasty of priests]." *The Anchor Bible: I Samuel,* 9:366.

20. II, 7:4–17, God to David, through Nathan; II, 7:18–29, David to God. "I will be a father to [Solomon]," says God, and he shall be a son to me; promises of discipline and steadfast love follow (II, 7:14–15).

21. "And we are haunted," Ackerman continues, "that Adonijah, the crown prince supported by Joab and the old guard, may indeed have been the more suitable successor." James S. Ackerman, "Knowing Good and Evil: A Literary Analysis of the Court History in 2 Samuel 9–20 and 1 Kings 1–2," *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1990): 41–64, 53.

22. "I Kings," 163–164.

23. An otherwise excellent reader, Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis argues for David's good beginning and weakness/collapse in the end. "Consider the end of David's life in I Kings 1. David, we have been told, is old and advanced in years, cold, and a maiden has been brought to keep him warm. We hear that Adonijah, one of his sons, has exalted himself saying, 'I will be king.' The difference between this episode and the opening episode tells us a great deal about David's reign. For one thing, we hear nothing of the presence of the Lord in the second episode. Many people recall oaths made in the Lord's name and the Lord is called upon for safety, but the stage is filled with human characters who, as the Lord had pointed out to Samuel earlier, and as is only reasonable, see as men see. They are dazzled, as the Lord said to Samuel, by the outward appearance. Adonijah is beautiful, he has horsemen and chariots, fifty men to run before him; he sacrifices sheep, oxen, and fatlings, and gives a sumptuous banquet. Those who favor Solomon put on a good show of their own, banking heavily on outward appearance—Solomon rides on David's mule, he is anointed before crowds of people, the trumpet blows, the people shout, 'Long live King Solomon.' As Jonathan reports to Adonijah, 'the city is in an uproar.' What a difference between this noisy display—a scene repeated three times in the narrative—and the simple words to Samuel: 'Anoint him; for this is he.' David's court is heavily politicized, people are looking out for themselves. As David moves toward death, those around him scheme to secure their own futures. What has gone wrong? Why is David leaving as his legacy a divided, insecure kingdom?" "King David of Israel," in Kenneth R. R. Gros Louis, ed., *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1982), 2:207–208. So much is true, here; the problem, as I have demonstrated, is in the failure to note a pattern of details within the I Kings account, as well as the pattern of failed fathers in which it is

located, a pattern concluded with the significant twist of David the father giving way, properly, to David the king.

24. Words appropriate for Solomon himself: the new king begins with conspicuous humility, a nonexalting spirit. But in his love for foreign women, and turning away from God to other gods, he becomes, implicitly, exalted in his own eyes (see I Kings 11).

25. Rogers captures well the sense of the appropriate here, by referring to David's original curse of Joab: "Later, in [II] 3:39, still with reference to the death of Abner, David repeats the curse in another form: 'May Yahweh repay the one who does evil according to his own evil.' I Kings 2:33 announces the fulfillment of that curse. The concern of I Kings 2:31b–33 is to make clear that the old curse pronounced by David has found its mark at last. Thus, the retribution of Yahweh, though it may for a time be delayed, will not tarry forever. "Narrative Stock and Deuteronomistic Elaboration in 1 Kings 2," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50, n. 3 (July 1988): 401–402.

26. "I and II Samuel," in Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 133.

27. *The Life of David* (New York: Shocken Nextbook, 2005), 193.

28. Rogers suggests the justice of the situation, both past (though "incongruous") and present: "Once again the victim's fate is presented as having been sealed with his own words: Shimei has violated the oath which he swore to Solomon in the name of Yahweh (v 43 [1 Kings 2]; cf. vv 36–38), and thus he is to die. As in the case of Joab, this sentence is followed by an incongruous condemnation for behavior long past (v 44). Here, too, is a pronouncement of judgment involving the return of the perpetrator's evil upon his own head (v 44) and a blessing on the royal house (v 45)." "Narrative Stock," 403.

29. *The Life of David,* 198.

30. As the title of Rogers's helpful essay indicates ("Narrative Stock and Deuteronomistic Elaboration in 1 Kings 2"), we find at the end of David's story a composite artistry that weaves into a received tradition a "deuteronomistic" perspective requiring, in the end, a strong and positive David who advises his son in no uncertain curse-blessing language. Rogers's view, incidentally, turns the major interpretive paradigm of Robert Polzin (a weak, fading, and consistently negative David—a warning against monarchy, to exilic Israel)—on its head: "The juxtaposition of the arrival of delayed retribution with the restatement of the promise of blessing and stability for the Davidic throne stands as a clear message of hope and assurance to the historian's generation: if, e.g., an old curse pronounced by David finally takes effect in the next generation, then how much more surely will the promise spoken by Yahweh be established" (413).

31. David Gunn assumes, along with others cited here, a general failure and fading of David that matches his physical enfeeblement, a weak king who allows a stronger party to prey on him: "The strong possibility exists . . . that we are witnessing an act of deliberate deception, an ingenious ploy by the Solomic party. Where David in his senility imagines that he is bestowing the kingdom, in actuality it is being taken from him, not by violence this time (as in Absalom's case) but *taken* all the same. So

Solomon succeeds where Absalom failed." *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1978), 106. But Gunn is more cautious than most: "The pivotal action in the final episode, the giving away of the kingdom, may assume from one position the appearance of being the act of a man who can recognize his inability to cope any longer (David is now very old) and can by choice relinquish his hold over something that he can no longer claim with responsibility to be his. But this view struggles to hold its own. The predominant perspectives are negative" (104).

32. For example: Walter Brueggemann states, and accepts, the conventional notion of two sources, and two Davids—a good David in "The Rise of David" (I, 16:1–II, 5:5) and a bad David (whose decline is accentuated by the first two chapters of I Kings) in the "Succession Narrative" (II, 6–I Kings 1 and 2). Brueggemann cites Aage Carlson, "[who] has suggested that the two conventional narratives are juxtaposed so that the first portrays David 'under blessing' and the second, David 'under curse.'" *David's Truth: In Israel's Imagination and Memory* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985, 41–42). David Gunn presses the matter, imaginatively, by portraying David in the worst possible light with an added irony of David as victim where he had been the victimizer: as David seized Bathsheba, even so does Solomon seize the kingdom from his senile father (see note 30 above).

33. Fiat from God, delivered through Nathan; II, 12:10–11.

34. *Ichabod toward Home: The Journey of God's Glory,* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 3. The pattern of David's failures, culminating with the failed-father pattern, echoes most ominously the failure of father Eli, and the consequence of God going back on the divine promise. What separates David, then, from Eli? That is a question among many critical questions that the text both raises and answers.

35. For much of the story, the enigma of David's character is tied up with the enigma of God's character: slowly, subtly, and compellingly, the drama moves through the circling and interlocking of patterns toward a full disclosure of the story's two main characters. Solving the mystery of David—who is he?—will go a long way, in this story, in illuminating the nature of a God who found David "better" than Saul. What does God consider "better"? To know the answer is to know something essential about this story's God. And yet: for so much of the story, as it unfolds in the latter part of 2 Samuel, the king looks very bad, hopelessly enmeshed in wrongdoing as a husband-adulterer, murderer, and failed father.

CHAPTER 7

1. The history of these people goes back, to confrontations with God's people in the wilderness after Egypt: Aaron has to hold up the hand of Moses before the Israelites can prevail against them. God utters a curse against them (Exod. 17:8–16). Saul was to have wiped them out, utterly (chapter 1). The appropriateness of David's action here is based not only on the presumption by the Amalekite of claiming harm against the Lord's anointed, then, but perhaps also on the very fact that the one who claims harm is an Amalekite. We have heard about the Amalekites just before the first version of Saul's death. David's temporary city of Ziklag had been burned

down by Amalekites, who had taken all of David's people. David is able to recover his people from the marauders, granting spoils to all the towns of Judah (I, 30). Earlier in the story we recall Saul's second wrongdoing, involving the Amalekites. King Saul had been told by Samuel to put the Amalekites to utterly destroy (*herem*) these people (cp. Exodus 17:4); Saul does so, almost, saving alive King Agag and some of the best animals, for supposed sacrifice. Samuel himself has to have Agag put to death, after letting Saul know, yet again, that God has decided against him as king (I, 15). Yet here are these Amalekites ransacking David's city, and here is an Amalekite lying to David about slaying the Lord's anointed.

2. Marti Steussy, for example, insists on the hiddenness of David, including his emotional responses (true enough, in general), to the point of denying any insight given by the text into David's heart: "With the possible exception of 2 S 13:21 (in the Greek version, which speaks of David's love for Amnon as firstborn), David is never said to love either God or another human person. Love for Jonathan may (or may not) underlie David's sparing of Mephibosheth in 2 S 21:7." *David: Biblical Portraits of Power* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 70. Such a judgment is problematic on several counts. There is David's confessed love for Jonathan, difficult to simply dismiss (presumably on the grounds that the entire eulogy is purely political, designed to rally Saul's house behind him). And what of David's father's love for Amnon? What we are shown throughout the story of David and his sons is an emotional response that is love, a skewed love—not the quality of true love God confesses to having in regard to David's son Solomon. Viewed from within the pattern of failed fathers, we find a disturbingly deep emotional response to sons Amnon and Absalom; we are provided, contra Steussy, a key look inside David's heart.

3. "The Amalekite's verbal lie is that he killed Saul. His behavioral lie, so to speak, is that all his signs of mourning—torn clothes and earth on head—clash with his equally obvious anticipation of being rewarded for his alleged contribution to the royal succession. Might not David's behavior be similarly duplicitous?" Significantly, Polzin continues with the avowed conjecture: "How can he not rejoice, finally, at the death of the murderous Saul, an event that clears David's path to the throne of Israel? When David speaks to the dead Amalekite, 'Your blood be upon your head, for your own mouth has testified against you, saying, "I have slain the Lord's anointed"' (1:16), we may perhaps hear the narrator's unspoken words to David concerning the young king's complicity in the death of Saul and his coming involvement in the fall of Saul's house. . . . Both David and his double outwardly mourn the death of Saul, but perhaps both secretly rejoice over it. *Neither actually kills Saul but both look forward to profiting from his death.* As the Amalekite strips Saul of his emblems of royalty, so David has done with the cutting off of Saul's royal robe in 1 Samuel 24. As an effective narrative embodiment that suggests duplicity in profiting from the death of Saul while publicly bemoaning his demise, the lying Amalekite is a fitting narrative emblem for a complicated story of the rise and fall of Israel's first two kings. The Amalekite is an anticipatory figure of the David who will speak and act in 2 Samuel." *David and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History,* 3 vols. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 3:7.

4. That is, the territory of Benjamin and Ephraim—from the northern tip of the Dead Sea north; Hebron, the main city of Judah, is due west of the central portion of the Dead Sea. See, Kyle P. McCarter Jr., *The Anchor Bible: II Samuel* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 87–88.

5. See, for example, Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel: A Commentary,* translated by J. S. Bowden from the 2nd German ed. (1960) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 251–252.

6. Robert Polzin: "Numbers appear to perform symbolic function within the story. In the tournament, 'twelve verses twelve' probably has a tribal significance mirroring the conflict between north and south that constituted 'the long war between the house of Saul and the house of David.'" *David and the Deuteronomist,* 3:28.

7. Readers Steven McKenzie and Robert Polzin, frequently cited in this study, build a case for an obvious glossing of David's probable culpability in all matters political. This incident with Abner's death (paralleled for Polzin with Saul's slaying) is for both Polzin and McKenzie an "obvious" example; I will present more pointed remarks from Polzin regarding this Abner sequence. McKenzie gives a list of determinations, hypothesized, that tell against David:"The episodes in the story of David's rise function to legitimate David as Saul's successor by answering charges against him such as the following:

(1) David sought to advance himself as king at Saul's expense.
(2) David was a deserter.
(3) David was an outlaw.
(4) David was a Philistine mercenary.
(5) David murdered Nabal and seized his wife, Abigail, and his property.
(6) David was implicated in Saul's death.
(7) David was implicated in Abner's death.
(8) David was implicated in Ishbaal's death.
(9) David annihilated Saul's heirs when he took the throne.
(10) David had his own sons murdered to preserve his place on the throne."

King David: A Biography (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 32–33. While certainly there are gaps in the David story (always gaps that the narrator leaves for the audience to solve with the cues given), McKenzie's clever reading of the text yields what seem to be no more than historical possibilities. In any event, what I am exploring is the literary text as we have it by way of patterns of repetition indicating the narrator's meanings.

8. As noted in chapter 6, the curse is carried out by Solomon, at David's behest. Many read this detail as an example of David the revengeful butcher, who passes off on his son what would have been distasteful for himself. Rather, one might recall David's need, whatever his distaste regarding Joab's ruthlessness, for the skill of his commander; the king has gotten the military use of Joab, his success as a commander. Furthermore, David understands that Joab could well prove gravely troublesome to Solomon, given the military commander's record of supporting the wrong

person, Adonijah, the rival of Solomon—and the wrong person for the job, as the text suggests.

9. Robert Polzin finds David's pleasing of the people suspect, along with the suspicion that David allowed or managed Abner's murder. "An air of seduction permeates chapter 3, which details the incidents leading up to the murder of Abner without the knowledge of David, whose public mourning convinces Israel that he was not implicated in such a crime." *David and the Deuteronomist,* 3:35. Polzin suggests his view of the Big Picture: "What my reading of the history of royal Israel has emphasized, time and again is its desire to teach an audience in exile that cherished traditions about the royal throne of David have a seductive air about them" (44).

That all of the people were pleased with David for his response to news of Abner's death is suspect, Polzin asserts, because of David's seductive power, a power that actually disguises calumny with pleasing performance. "If David pleased the people [early on, 1 Sam 18], he also impressed Achish, who tells him, 'As the Lord lives, you have been honest, and to me it seems right that you should go out and come in with me in the campaign; for I have found nothing wrong in you from the day of your coming to me to this day' (1 Sam. 29:6). If David succeeds in deceiving the enemy by his actions, does his 'going out and coming in' ever deceive his fellow Israelites? This is precisely the question that the Deuteronomist has been raising—and raises once again in 2 Samuel 3 [the story of Joab, Abner, David]" (42–43).

That the public mourning has convinced Israel does not of itself suggest false show of mourning. The narrator claims that the people *understood* (not surmised or thought).

10. *The Life of David* (New York: Shocken Nextbook, 2005), 78.

11. "The narrator has rarely allowed us to enter the inner life of David," Robert Polzin suggests, following with a rhetorical question implicating David: "Why does the narrator now make sure that readers know that David is innocent of Abner's death?" *David and the Deuteronomist,* 3:36. It would be one thing to claim this detail among others as evidence of the final writer's tampering with prior sources condemning David, but quite another to suggest that the original audience of the story was meant to be sure that the direction of David's story was a consistent and coy condemnation of Israel's most acclaimed king—and further, for Polzin's view, a critique, through failed David, of all monarchy. For Polzin, then, David is made to represent a monarchy that has been and always will be an unforgivable affront against God and a possible reason for the exile (during which period most scholars agree the final form of David was edited/written). The first and most important response to this view is to note the ideality of David's rule—the ideal king—by which all other kings are measured, in I and II Kings, and found wanting.

12. For example: "Just what the Lord has sworn to David," Abner says to Saul's son Ishbaal, "that will I accomplish for him" (II, 3:9).

13. The rest of Saul's sons, apparently, are dead—a fact whose surrounding circumstances the narrator makes part of a chiastic conclusion (II, 21–24)—circumstances that place the onus for these deaths on Saul himself.

14. We have seen Jonathan making with David a covenant (contents undisclosed at this point), yielding his royal garment and accoutrements to David (I, 18:3–4). That covenant and Jonathan's intentions become clear by the time David and Jonathan part. "But if my father intends to do you harm," says Jonathan to David, "the Lord do so to Jonathan, and more also, if I do not disclose it to you, and send you away, so that you may go in safety. May the Lord be with you, as he has been with my father. If I am still alive, show me the faithful love of the Lord; but if I die, never cut off your faithful love from my house, even if the Lord were to cut off every one of the enemies of David from the face of the earth." This is a serious plea, a covenant, with prophetic insight: "Thus Jonathan made a covenant with the house of David, saying, 'May the Lord seek out the enemies of David.' Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him; for he loved him as he loved his own life" (I, 20:13–17). The assumption behind Jonathan's words is the certainty of David's taking over the kingdom from Saul, some day.

15. *The Life of David,* 66.

16. "Knowing Good and Evil: A Literary Analysis of the Court History in 2 Samuel 9–20 and 1 Kings 1–2," *Journal of Biblical Literature.* (109,1, 1990), 44–45. With many biblical scholars, Ackerman favors the option that the biblical writer is presenting here and elsewhere a calculating and conniving David.

17. Steven McKenzie is searching for "the real (historical) David," alluding to David's presumably happy response to the news of Amnon's death, as pleased with that death. (Robert Polzin, as we have seen, takes McKenzie's suggestions of implicit hints at a negative portrait of David one step further, suggesting that the text itself yields, intentionally, this sinister David—a view available to any close listening or reading audience.) "As with Saul," McKenzie suggests, alluding to David's reception of Saul's death and the death news, "David was not present when Amnon was killed. And as he had done with both Saul and Abner, David exhibited extreme sorrow at the news of Amnon's passing. Here again, we suspect that the charge the writer defends against was true. That is, David likely was a party to Amnon's assassination. . . . If we are correct that David was involved in the conspiracy against Amnon, we may assume that he sent Absalom to Geshur for safekeeping and for appearances' sake. He had no real intention of punishing Absalom. . . . David may have sought Amnon's life simply because he had raped Tamar. But the fact that Amnon was David's oldest son (2 Sam. 3:2) suggests another reason. David likely perceived him a threat to his own rule—all the more so since Amnon's mother was Ahinoam, who may once have been Saul's wife. Thus, '[Amnon's] removal eliminate[d] the last vestiges of Saul's legacy from the succession.'" *King David,* 166–167. Note that McKenzie goes beyond a reading between the lines: from the story itself, he claims, we discover that *the charge the writer defends against* [David's complicit killing of Amnon, through a set-up Absalom] *was true.* At worst, we have a misreading of the text; at best, we have a possibly ingenious—and insightful—investigation of the story behind the text.

18. Scholars have mounted plausible arguments for each, though Marti Steussy leaves the answer open: "And for which son does David mourn—Amnon who is dead or Absalom who has fled to Geshur with bloodguilt on his head?" *David,* 65–66.

19. To miss the interlocking patterns is to miss this dramatic high point of contrast between private indulgence and public trust. Three samples:

(1) Charles Conroy cites David's "love for Absalom (13, 39–41)," which he claims "gains the reader's sympathy"—compounded by the strange conclusion that "the scene with the Tekoite woman increases this. Though his severity towards the returned Absalom (14, 24. 28) is somewhat surprising, the reconciliation scene (14, 33) confirms the sympathetic picture of the king." *Absalom, Absalom!: Narrative and Language in 2 Sam. 13–20,* Analecta Biblica 81 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 111. (View 2) Steven L. McKenzie, *King David:* "In 2 Samuel as it now exists, the troubles in David's family are his own fault because of his adultery with Bathsheba and attempted murder of Uriah. But if the Bathsheba story is set aside as a later addition, the account of Absalom's revolt appears in quite a different light. The apologetic intent of the original author comes through. This author sought to evoke sympathy for David by portraying him as a loving father who was victimized by his rebellious son. Throughout the narrative David is portrayed as a gentle man, perhaps too gentle and loving for his own good. He is literally tender to a fault. The blame for the disasters that occur in his reign falls first upon his evil sons, Amnon and Absalom, who take advantage of his gentle nature" (162). (View 3) Walter Brueggemann's error moves in the same direction. He picks up on the possible paralleling of David's "cold" public response to the death of Bathsheba's husband Uriah and the "warm" personal sobbing of David for son Absalom. But his surmise about significance couldn't be further from the truth of a private David who can be both good and bad and a public David who can be both good and bad. "The response of David to the *death of Absalom* is stunningly contrasted to his response to the *death of Uriah* [good, warm contrasted with bad, cold; emphasis his]." *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 140. All three views fail to reflect an awareness of Eli's most serious blundering with his sons and the subsequent pattern of hearing death news that posits David's wailing over Absalom as the cry of an indulgent father to the serious detriment of public trust.

20. Alter, following Fokkelman, understands David's return to the gate as the sign of a beaten man unable to respond to the presumed proactive measures advocated by Joab ("go out at once and speak kindly to your servants," II, 19:7). *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999), 313. To preclude the possibility of speaking to his servants by going to the gate is not only to ignore the purpose of a king-judge at the gate (to hear and respond to the people) but also to ignore the follow-up words of the biblical text: "The troops were all told, 'See, the king is sitting in the gate'; and all the troops came before the king" (II, 19:8). That Eli falls from his seat at the gate, a failed priest and judge, highlights by contrast the recovery of David. Alter assumes a general decline for David from the failed-father episodes on, culminating in the deathbed scene of I Kings. Quite a contrary reading is mandated, I think, if one pays close attention to the pattern of failed fathering, of which David's response to Adonijah is a crucial instance (see my prior chapter).

21. The semantic field for violently passionate response is wide in the Hebrew. In addition to (1) *hared,* and (2) *ragaz* (see Job 9:6), we have (3) *hul,* cause to tremble, to rise, dance (Psalm 114:7); (4) *ga'ash,* convulse, quake, toss to and fro; (5) *ra'ash,* cause to quake. II Samuel 22:8 includes three of the preceding! In one of David's two poems, used in the narrator's conclusion to I and II Samuel, we find in the NRSV the following verses from David's long poem: "Then the earth *quaked and rocked* [*ra'ash*], / the heavens' foundations *shuddered* [*ragaz*], they *quaked* [*ga'ash*] at his blazing anger."

22. Robert Polzin's overarching hypothesis of the writer's attempt to condemn monarchy and most especially King David leads him, here and elsewhere (see earlier), to gloss over critical detail. "Both Eli's house and its successor, Samuel's house . . . are stand-ins for royalty, especially David's," Polzin claims, with some point but, most important, with key exceptions. "Take the detail in Samuel's birth story where we encountered Eli 'sitting on a seat/throne in the temple/palace' (1:9)," Polzin continues. "It is no accident that we will find Eli in a similar position at the end: 'Behold Eli was sitting upon the seat/throne' (4:13). From first to last Eli is a royal figure, so that the triple treatment of the evil practices of Eli's house in 2:11–36 reverberates with royal implications." *Samuel and the Deuteronomist,* 2:44. Indeed. But what Polzin never mentions in his suggestion of David's house as an extension of the evil in Eli's house is the key role of this seat-throne-gate linkage between Eli and David: Eli vacates the gate permanently, a logical extension of his waywardness, whereas David resumes his kingly responsibilities at the seat-throne-gate.

23. *The Life of David,* 186.

24. As we saw in chapter 6, after his father's death, Adonijah makes the bold and unsavory move of asking for Abishag, consort of David, as wife—which Solomon interprets, reasonably, as a step toward gaining his father David's kingdom, as well as his last concubine (I Kings 2:10–25). Solomon had warned Adonijah to behave properly, or else! In David's list of those Solomon must deal with harshly, Adonijah is missing. After his father's death, Adonijah asks for Abishag in marriage, and is therefore put to death by Solomon (I Kings 1:49–53; 2:13–35).

25. *The Life of David,* 187.

26. As explored in chapter 6, some scholars interpret the characterization of David in his dying days quite differently, taking the physical marks of deterioration and his mental vacuity as metaphor for his general—and final—state of mind and spirit. Especially as seen from within the pattern of failed fathers and the closely linked pattern of responses to messengers and death news, David's risking the displeasure of his son Adonijah, agreeing with the messengers, is significant. This response represents, in the light of the patterns, a strength of character, a transcending of a fatherly indulgence that has dominated a king anointed by the Lord to serve Israel's well-being.

CHAPTER 8

1. David Damrosch makes this comment: "As Meir Sternberg notes, what is most striking about the use of this literary device [the chiasm of II, 21–24] is its lack of

any literary function (*Poetics,* 40)." *The Narrative Covenant* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1971), 237.

Brevard Childs does much better, noting that "the significance of this appendix for the reading of the whole narrative has seldom been pursued," and then goes on to suggest a "highly welcomed exception . . . offered by the commentary of Hertzberg who began to draw out the exegetical significance of the appendix. He has correctly seen that the psalm of ch 22 offers a theological commentary on the entire history of David (cf. also Gutbrod)." Childs is sensitive to the purposes but interpretive limits of source criticism: "Thus, for example, the case of Ellinger's reconstruction of the background of David's thirty chief men (II, 23.8ff.), or the role of possible aetiological motifs in ch. 24, are not affected by the concern for the function within the final form of the narrative." *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 274.

Walter Brueggemann understands the cohesiveness of this chiastic conclusion, but suggests that these four chapters "revert" to a more primitive tribal perspective and so are at odds with the overall narrative's development. I will argue the opposite, that this chiasm appropriately concludes the preceding story. Brueggemann, "2 Samuel 21–24: An Appendix of Deconstruction," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50, n. 3 (July 1988): 383–397.

The most notable exception to the confusion surrounding this conclusion, explored in this chapter, is the close reading of this chiasm in the context of the whole story done by Herbert H. Klement, in *II Samuel 21–24: Context, Structure and Meaning in the Samuel Conclusion,* European University Studies, series 23, Theology, vol. 682 (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 161.

2. "Chiastic structure [in Hebrew Scriptures] is more than an artificial or artistic device. . . . It is rather, and most remarkably so, a key to meaning. Not paying sufficient attention to it may result in failure to grasp the true theme." Y. T. Radday, "Chiasmus in Hebrew Biblical Literature," in J. W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity: Structures, Analyses, Exegesis* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981), 51. "When chiasmus achieves the level of ordering thoughts and words throughout an entire pericope, or of a sustained unfolding of an artistic verbal expression, the character or form itself merges with the message and meaning of the passage." J. W. Welch, *Chiasmus in Antiquity* 11.

3. Early, Saul's warriors slip away in the face of danger, hiding wherever they can (I, 13:5–7); late, his troops are fleeing before the Philistines, and then Saul commits suicide as all appears lost (I, 31:1–4).

4. "The three men remain anonymous. . . . In this way the episode exemplifies the relationship between David and his heroes in general. It typifies the attitude of them all, and in particular those concerning whom no further individual feats are listed. It directs a spotlight on all their devotion, heroic courage and readiness to fight, and on David's concern for the life and actions of his trusty followers." *II Samuel 21–24,* 193.

5. Robert Polzin reads Israel's general adulation of David as an indication by the narrator of their gullibility: "What sounds loud and clear through the piling up of

universals ('all the people,' 'everything that the king did,' 'so all the people and all Israel') is the narrator's distance from the people's wholesale acceptance of David, even in this instance [their approval of David's condemnation of Abner's death at the hands of treacherous Joab, II, 3] when such confidence in him, as the reader well knows, turns out incidentally to be justified. However innocent David is in this instance, the narrator is saying, the people appear foolish in their wholesale acceptance of the king." *David and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History,* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 3:40–41. The problem with Polzin's interpretation is the number of such instances that overwhelmingly support Israel's approval of David, as we have seen earlier.

6. As we have seen, Saul's son Jonathan demonstrates by contrast the lack of his father's prowess (chapter 1 here); even on the day God gave victory, there had been "very great confusion," with "every sword against the other"—capped by "Saul commit[ting] a very rash act" (I, 14:20–24). Fighting against Israel's enemies, Saul consistently lets himself become distracted by an on-the-run David and his small band of men: Saul diverts Israel's forces from proper objectives to fight one of Israel's own champions. The sorry state of Saul's military leadership ends appropriately in colossal defeat, with his troops fleeing and Saul committing suicide (I, 31).

7. Rival expressions of devotion to David from the people of Judah and Israel are "fierce" (v. 43).

8. In part, Joab's treachery is a slap at Amassa's unexplained delay in fulfilling David's order; more obviously, this is the ruthless Joab insuring his own return to prominence, defying David's appointment of Amassa as troop commander (II, 17:25). As Robert Alter nicely points out, David's motives in appointing Amassa are both personal and political: Joab has killed Absalom against the king's wishes, so replacing Joab might be personally satisfying, while politically Amassa is well placed to rally the people of Judah behind David. *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999), 314.

9. The Amelikites come back to haunt God's people: Saul had failed to utterly wipe them out as the prophet Samuel had instructed (see my chapter 1). This incident has been briefly described in prior chapters: God had declared utter destruction for the Amalekites for attacking the Israelites, who were fleeing Egypt, Ex. 17:4.

10. In keeping with his interpretive hypothesis of a Saul doomed by an arbitrary—even mean-spirited—God, David Gunn uses a supposed parallel involving this action of largesse by David:

> As David carries off the spoil ('This is David's spoil,' say the people as they drive off the livestock), he lays down rules for its division among his own men ('It is what Yahweh has given us,' he says) and makes 'presents' of it to his 'friends,' the elders of Judah . . . Saul faces the Philistines and death at Gilboa. Samuel's words of rejection still ring in our ears (15:19, 28:17):
>
> "Why did you not obey the voice of Yahweh? Why did you swoop on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of Yahweh?" [taking spoils from the Amalekites]

> "Because you did not obey the voice of Yahweh and carry out his fierce wrath against Amalek, Yahweh has done this thing to you this day."

> The arbitrary disparity in God's treatment of the two figures [relative to their taking of spoils from the defeated Amalekites] is nowhere made more manifest than here at the very culmination of the story. The thematic statement is plain. Good and evil come from God. He makes smooth the path of some; the path of others he strews with obstacles. He has his favorites; he has his victims. The reasons, if reasons exist, lie hidden the obscurity of God's own being. Saul is one of God's victims.

The Fate of King Saul (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1980), 110–111.

Such a judgment as Gunn's seems not only to ignore the immediate context of David's situation vis-à-vis the Amalekites—his city has been burned and the citizens captured—but also the Saul context, which involves an explicit order from God through Samuel for *herem,* utter destruction, of the Amalekites. (As mentioned in prior chapters, the Israelites were traveling from Egypt when Amalek and his people attacked, leading to this declaration from God: "Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Write this as a reminder in a book and recite it in the hearing of Joshua: I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven'" (Ex. 17:14).

11. Alter, *The David Story,* 302.

12. Shobi son of Nahash from Rabbah of the Ammonites, Machir son of Ammiel from Lo-debar, and Barzillai the Gileadite from Rogelim.

13. *II Samuel 21–24,* 198.

14. "The psalms in narrative contexts . . . were positioned with careful attention not only to links with the immediate context but also the particular thematic development of each book as a whole." James W. Watts, *Psalm and Story: Inset Hymns in Hebrew Narrative* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1992), 185.

15. "There is hardly one single word in 1 Sam. 2.1–10 which is not repeated at least once in 2 Sam. 22 . . . I shall try to prove that in every single respect it is an expansion of and counterpart to Hannah's prayer." Y. T. Radday, "Chiasmus in Hebrew Biblical Literature," 29. See my chart at the end of this chapter for examples of correspondence.

16. "In tones reminiscent of Deuteronomy or Proverbs," Bruce Birch suggests, "this portion of the psalm asserts the importance of righteousness and obedience to God's covenant as moral qualities that God takes seriously. . . . We remember that these words are placed in the mouth of David, and when this Davidic voice claims, 'I was blameless before him, and I kept myself from guilt' (v. 24a), we know that this has not always been the case. The words of such lofty ideals placed in the mouth of the man who took Bathsheba and killed Uriah become ironic and self-indicting." *New Interpreters Bible,* vol. 2, *The First and Second Books of Samuel, Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,* 1367.

17. For wrongdoing and response, see chapters 5 and 7 here; for right action, see chapters 3 and 4.

18. Psalm 18 is almost a word-for-word duplicate.

19. The lone exception is Michal, David's embittered wife (see chapter 4).

20. Walter Brueggemann, for example, offers a "just below the surface" reading that ignores the numerous key interlocking patterns of the text. "A theological reading of the 'Rise' [of David to power] is that the narrative evidences the providential intentionality of YHWH who has willed David's exalted rise to power. Just below the surface of this specific theological presupposition we may see that the 'Rise' is also wrought through a series of cunning and ruthless acts of self-advancement on the part of David, acts that are savored and artistically rendered by the narrator who wants us to notice that the 'Rise' is a carefully and perhaps shamelessly engineered advance, humanly crafted in the guise of divine providence. Thus the narrative rendering has multiple layers of telling that admit of an ironic reading." *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 135. What Brueggemann leaves out here is the possibility, as I have suggested, that "cunning and ruthless acts of self-advancement" can just as easily and more appropriately be viewed as David's acting politically in a God-devoted manner, pleasing the people in the way a good leader should.

21. Abraham, encouraged by God to be "blameless" (Gen. 17:1), makes such moral improvement as to finally engender the confidence of God: God can finally be sure of him (Gen. 22:12; see the section on Abraham in my *Genesis, The Story We Haven't Heard* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVPress, 2001).

22. See my *Genesis*, especially chapters 3–7.

23. Commenting on the last section of Psalm 19, J. Clinton McCann observes that *blameless* indicates "the orientation to life that faithful kings were supposed to embody and model for the people (see Pss 18:20–30; 21:7; note especially the repetition of 'blameless' in 18:23, 25 and 19:13)." "The Book of Psalms," in *New Interpreters Bible* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1996), 4:641.

24. With the possible exceptions of Noah and Job: Noah is simply "righteous," period, and end of a very brief report that serves the rhetorical purpose of saving God from the divine decision of destroying the entire Creation; Job maintains that he is righteous, perfect, with apparent basis in story fact—but the entire work is poetry, which makes use of hyperbole to build toward a monumental meaning other than the question of Job's blamelessness or lack of it.

25. The Torah speaks often and persuasively about atonement from God for one's guilt, through confession and sacrifice. Leviticus 4 is programmatic for the matter of guilt-cleansing—of remaining blameless, of keeping oneself from guilt. The point throughout Leviticus and Numbers is that no one is exempt from wrongdoing—not priests, not the whole congregation, not the ruler, and not ordinary people. Each group is cited in Leviticus 4, with the appropriate animals and elaborate ritual ("bull of the herd" for priests and the whole congregation; "male goat" for the ruler; "female goat" for the ordinary people). Such sacrificial detail indicates a recognition within this world of Torah that wrongdoing is ubiquitous but the recourse for remaining without guilt is ever present. David remains without guilt—is ultimately blameless—because he recognizes and responds appropriately to his wrongdoing, as we saw in chapter 7.

26. While it appears that Saul also consults with God, the nuance of difference is huge: Saul veers always toward divination and magic, with a resulting silence from God (see chapter 1 here).

27. Robert Polzin, for example, offers "two simple statements [that] serve to neutralize the self-exaltation that David exhibits in II, 22:1–23:7: First, in contrast to the bombastic picture of a warrior-king posturing like his warrior-God, the list of battles just preceding the poetry presents us with a David who grows weary and must be rescued by Abishai, 'You shall no more go out with us in battle,' David's men adjured him, 'lest you quench the lamp of Israel' (II, 21:15–17). How different this narrative David is from his poetic counterpart, who 'dawns upon [men] like the morning light, like the sun shining forth upon a cloudless morning' (II, 23:4). The contrast, then, between the reliability of the narrative and the self-promotion of the poetry is like the difference between a flickering lamp and the blazing sun. Second, nothing serves to deflate David's boasts better than his own statement, buried almost in the middle of the song. After exalting himself out of all proportion to the details of the story in which he appears, and before he continues to sing about how God exalted him above his adversaries (II, 22:49), David manages to speak words that echo Hannah's words in 1 Samuel 2 and that ought to temper his own exaltation: 'Thou dost deliver a humble people, but thy eyes are upon the exalted (*ramim*) to bring them down' (II, 22:28). David's mistake, foreshadowed by Hannah and documented throughout the History, was to move quickly from exaltation to exultation.'" *David and the Deuteronomist,* 3:207. Regarding Polzin's first assertion: I have been demonstrating in this chapter just how problematic a reading it is to view David as a weak leader just because his men value him enough, as "Lamp of Israel," to have him not, at his age, go into battle. That is, David's greatness lies in listening to his men when appropriate, when the obvious is true: David is aging, and is more important as a leader-lamp not fighting than as a foolish and vain warrior too proud to resist going into battle, even if beyond his years as a fighting man. Regarding the second assertion: David's claim that God exalts him, that God is his deliverer, indicates his need—his humility (as shown in this chapter). In fact, the narrator of I and II Samuel wishes to establish David as Israel's ideal monarch—as witness I and II Kings the frequent references to David as a good and righteous king, a standard by which most kings are judged inadequate.

28. *II Samuel 21–24,* 201.

29. Ibid., 208.

30. "While the psalm in 2 Sam. 22 describes the king as a military commander waging the wars of Yahweh, in 2 Sam. 23. 1–7, with its accent upon justice, the focus is placed on the second central responsibility of government. It concerns the ensuring of right and justice within the rulers sphere of power." Herbert Klement, *II Samuel 21–24,* 219.

31. See Walter Brueggemann, "2 Samuel 21–24: An Appendix of Deconstruction," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50, n. 3 (July 1988): 383–397) for an interpretation stressing reversion to an older tribal theology, and any number of commentators suggesting mere gloss, including Robert Alter (*The David Story*).

CHAPTER 9

1. "Saul's death," Klement comments, "had been reported and David's rule established long since, and it would surely have been enough for the finale to give a resume of David. It is not only through the inclusion of the psalms, but also through a final comparison of David and Saul, the two men anointed by Samuel who together constituted the main content of the book, that these texts are shown to be connected to the whole book." *II Samuel 21–24: Context, Structure and Meaning in the Samuel Conclusion,* European University Studies, series 23, Theology, vol. 682 (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 164.

2. Walter Brueggmann argues that this first of six parts of the chiasm, Saul's sin and David's response "is deliberately intended as a protest against the preceding 'official portrayal of David.' That is, the narrative is presented with high irony, to suggest that David in fact is not as we had first thought him to be."

Brueggemann acknowledges that "it is possible to read the narrative without irony and therefore not as a protest." But "this reading depends, however, on one very important assumption. The connection of Saul's bloodguilt and the famine is made only in verse 1, in an oracle from Yahweh given only to David. That is, the oracle is private for the king; no one else has access to the oracles; or it is given through a priest who is on the king's payroll. A positive reading of David in this narrative depends completely on the claim of this oracle. Because the oracle to David is quite private and because the tradition does not support the oracle, we may surmise that the oracle lacks historical support and is in fact a piece of Davidic fabrication. Thus I suggest that the oracle that links the famine to the failure of Saul serves primarily to give David warrant for his violence against the house of Saul." *First and Second Samuel* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1990), 336–337.

3. Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg: "The remedy to the curse of Saul's sin is left to David, who seeks the Lord about the people's plight. God lets David know about the bloodguilt and David consults the aggrieved party [and honors] the Gibeonites' demand. . . . David's policy of friendship towards Gibeon, continued later by Solomon, fits the whole situation excellently. [4–6a] The Gibeonites require blood, not money, for expiation. The execution of seven sons of Saul is in accordance with the law of tribal membership; the number seven is chosen as being a holy number." *I & II Samuel. A Commentary,* translated by J. S. Bowden from the 2nd German ed. (1960) (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964, 383.

4. "By setting the taboo," J. P. Fokkelman observes nicely, "Saul creates a situation which makes Jonathan a transgressor and then tempts the people into ritual error. In both cases Saul is quick to pass judgment: 'sin.' He feels quite all right at the other's mistake and has created for himself the opportunity of appearing deeply religious and performing meticulous ritual acts. The people's oath blocks and unmasks his striving. His show of force was religious fanaticism and betrays inner weakness." *The Crossing Fates,* in *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel,* (Assen/Maastricht, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, and Dover, N.H., 1986), 2:76–77.

That "weakness," I have been arguing throughout these chapters, is based on a deep-seated flaw of almost always responding poorly to fearfulness.

5. Herbert H. Klement comments on this connection: "The thing for which the blame is entirely ascribed to Saul is his violation of the traditional tribal rights. These include the ancient requirements of holy war concerning the carrying out of a ban against the Amalekites [original wrongdoing, I, 13 and 15]. It is in this context that his rejection takes place. Here in the Samuel Conclusion there is added a further, equally serious violation of rights on the part of Saul, his disregard of ancient covenant obligations with respect to the Gibeonites. Saul's guilt with regard to traditional tribal rights is thus verified in the concluding section with a second example. The tragedy of his house and the violation of the ordinances of the tribal community, the keeping of which is watched over by Yahweh, are portrayed as corresponding to each other." *II Samuel 21–24,* 172.

6. I, 14:7, for example. Saul's inquiry is framed by his "rash act" of insisting on a vow of his troops' abstinence from food (14:24) and the ugly consequences where the people rather than the king decide Jonathan's fate, for the good (14:31–45).

7. *II Samuel 21–24,* 174. Klement distinguishes between David and Saul : "The requisite fulfillment of the atoning blood vengeance . . . was clearly not possible for the Gibeonites themselves, as a dependant people within Israel. It is only David as king who can guarantee the exercise of impunity of this right. Whereas Saul blatantly broke the traditional ordinances, David appears as the one who is prepared to ensure their application. As well as this, David is concerned that there should be an appropriate burial of all those who have been killed in the family tomb. 173–174.

8. As we saw, this tail end of the days of judges was marked by gang-rape, murder, and a most uncivilized civil war.

9. See chapter 1. In mounting what can seem like a plausible argument for partially blaming God regarding Saul's fall, Cheryl Exum ignores this matter of Saul's compromised response to wrongdoing: "We witness as Saul, driven by petty fears and jealousies, becomes a disintegrated personality, but most disturbing is the realization that the evil spirit which torments him and makes his plight even more desperate is the agency of none other than Yhwh. In this acknowledgment of the root of Saul's distress, we discover why Saul alone of biblical heroes attains a truly tragic stature, and we reach the core of the tragic vision: the problem of evil. . . . Saul encounters God's dark side in a way that Samson never experiences it. . . . Saul is caught between his own turbulent personality and the antagonism of God toward human kingship. He displays heroic greatness in his refusal to acquiesce in the fate prophesied by Samuel, taking extraordinary steps to hold on to his kingdom. A lesser man, a man without *hubris,* might merely accept his destiny. Saul, however, wrestles against it." *Tragedy and Biblical Narrative* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 40–41. To praise Saul's defensiveness and fearful unyielding as heroic *hubris* is to miss the markers of *this* narrative, however well this praise would work for a Greek hero. And to attribute the root cause of Saul's malady to Yahweh is to sidestep what is revealed as Saul's fundamentally poor response to fear ("[Yhwh] makes his plight even

more desperate is the agency of none other than Yhwh. In this acknowledgment of the root of Saul's distress . . .").

10. "The primary difference between David's story and Saul's is this: the sign of Saul's punishment was the impermanence of his house, whereas the permanence of David's house will be the sign of this: God promises David, 'The sword shall never depart from your house' (2 Samuel 12:10)." *David and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomic History*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993). 3:127.

Polzin is operating, as we have seen and will see again, from within a hypothesis that determines all, namely, that the writer of David's story is concerned primarily in revealing the disastrous nature of monarchy in Israel.

11. See note 1 of chapter one.

12. These are the only occasions in the Hebrew Scriptures when the lowly flea is mentioned.

13. A rendering of "God do so to David and more also, if by morning I leave so much as one male of all who belong to him." P. Kyle McCarter comes closer to the sense here: "May God do thus and so to David and thus again, if I spare till morning a single one of all he has who piss against the wall." *I Samuel,* in *The Anchor Bible,* (New York: Doubleday, 1980), 8:390.

14. Consider, however, the slightly different view of Regina Schwartz. She suggests that actions like David's taking of Bathsheba "are not separate spheres, public and private, that merely affect one another—such a reading would say that the private acts of David have public consequences, that David is torn between private desires and public duties, that David's private affections get in the way of his public role. The quest for such causality is misguided because politics *are* sexual, and sexuality is political." That is, David's taking of Bathsheba was as political a move as lustful, the husband's political position presumably being coopted by David.

15. To rid the country of famine, David must resolve Saul's wrongdoing to rid Israel of "bloodguilt" (II, 21:1).

16. After mourning for Abner, a victim of Joab's relentless and murderous political will, David had asked, "Do you not realize that a prince, a great man, has fallen in Israel today? I, though anointed king, am still gentle, and these men [Joab and his brother Abishai] are too rough for me" (II, 3:38); see *The Anchor Bible* for the apt contrast between "gentle" and "rough."

17. Charles Conroy notes well the complex manner in which the narrator establishes evaluation of the action involving David the father and Joab the military commander. "While the narrator prefers the close-up approach, it is worth noting some distinctions here which throw light on his attitude towards the personages. David's journey from Jerusalem has been narrated at length (15, 16–16, 4 [15:16–16:4]; 17, 15–22), but Absalom's is mentioned only very briefly (17, 24b); then too David's preparations in Transjordan are described in some detail (17, 27–29; 18,1–5), but of Absalom it is said only that 'Israel and Absalom encamped in the land of Gilead' (17, 26). And finally when it comes to telling of Absalom's end (18, 9–15), Absalom himself is spoken about in a completely impersonal way: no words of his are men-

tioned, no pleas for mercy, just the physical fact of his being caught in the tree. One can gather from these points already that the narrator does not share David's love for his rebel son; he recognizes the human depths of this love and describes it with memorable empathy, but ultimately, one feels, he is more in agreement with Joab's blunt speech of 19, 6–8 at least as regards the point that the king must put the interests of his people as a whole before his private grief. Though the picture presented of David is undoubtedly a sympathetic one (see also 18,2b–4.24–27), the narrator is not so blind a partisan of his as not to see the justice of Joab's brutally worded rebuke that the father's grief has overwhelmed the statesman's reason." *Absalom! Absalom!* Analecta Biblica 81 (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1978), 49.

18. As we have seen, David Gunn expresses a fairly common view that David devolves into the merely private man from this point on, unable to rule effectively as king any longer: "The account of the suppression of Absalom's rebellion has several distinct movements, but they drive relentlessly towards that cry: 'Would that I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!' The king ceases to be king. From this point on he is simply and essentially man. In the same manner, the blind Eli sits alone." *The Story of King David: Genre and Interpretation* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1978), 58. Among the more salient points of the pattern missed here is a recognition of the different outcomes of Eli and David: Eli literally falls off his seat at the gate—metaphorically, a cessation of his role as leader of the people, judge, while David is able to resume his seat at the gate, carrying out his public role as king and judge.

19. Klement's full view:. "David's guilt is measured in terms not of the reaction of the people who are being counted, but of his behaviour in relationship to Yahweh's right of ownership of his people, when Yahweh had not commissioned him to carry out the census. What is in question is the superiority of Yahweh's kingship over that of David. If this interpretation of the nature of David's sin is accepted as valid, then the questioning of the institution of kingship which is found in 1Sam. 8 and 12 is taken up for the last time here in the Samuel Conclusion. According to this it is not permitted to the king, who rules by the will and approbation of Yahweh, to act autonomously with regard to the people who are Yahweh's possession. Even as king he remains subject to the one who is the real Sovereign. He is not king alongside, in opposition to or in place of Yahweh, he can only be king under Yahweh." *II Samuel 21–24,* 178.

For further discussions, see almost any commentary; Walter Brueggemann is especially lucid. *First and Second Samue*l, in James L. Mays, Patrick D. Miller, and Paul J. Achtemeier, eds., *Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 1990), 352–353.

20. Robert Polzin: "No matter that the land is ravaged by three years of famine in the first case and three days of pestilence in the second; such devastation is clearly the king's fault in chapter 21 (Saul broke the oath Israel made to the Gibeonites), whereas chapter 24 attributes blame ambiguously to Israel on one hand and to David on the other." *David and the Deuteronomist,* 3:211–212. In reckoning the complexity of culpability here, Polzin misses the most glaring fact: God's inciting David to take the census.

21. I will take up this matter relative to Homer's Odysseus, a foil that helps to sharpen our understanding of David—and of God—and of the biblical method of character presentation.

22. Why does David give the options back for God to decide—except for the possibility of facing the enemy ("human hands")? Famine and pestilence are in the natural realm; enemies are ruthless; God is merciful. So David says, choosing to let God choose.

23. "Saul's reign is simply a preview of David's," Polzin opines, "and of every king of Israel and Judah after him. In fact, Saul's reign appears to be the Deuteronomist's prefiguring image of kingship itself as described throughout the History [Judges–2 Kings]." *Samuel and the Deuteronomist,* 2:213.

24. P. Kyle McCarter, trans., *II Samuel,* in *The Anchor Bible,* Vol. 9 (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 453.

25. Perhaps the narrator expects us to recall that God had come to the an erring Abraham with the challenge to be blameless (Gen.17:1). Nowhere in Hebrew narratives does "blameless" imply anything other than a wrongdoing that is put away, in the eyes of God. See my *Genesis, The Story We Haven't Heard* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVPress, 2001). This God sees not as mortals see. David's God looks for and credits as righteousness such moral improvement and coming-to-trust as Abraham comes to exhibit. What was simply attributed to Noah becomes a blamelessness, beginning with Abraham, that must be achieved, worked out.

26. Walter Brueggmann is among many who fail to take into account the pattern of David's wrongdoing, and therefore miss the sense in which David's claim to be "blameless," to have his "guilt taken away" can be true.

"These verses" (21–28), Brueggemann comments,

> exhibit a remarkable change of mood from what preceded. Lyrical abandonment gives way to moral symmetry and the daring affirmation that the reason God has heard and intervened is because "I was blameless" (v. 24). The mood is so changed that some scholars have concluded these verses are a different poem. It is also possible to say, however, when we remember that these words are placed in David's mouth, that this is a bold, even shameless move of royal ideology. The king wants not only to confess that God heard the petition but that in some way God is only doing God's part in an equitable partnership. Taken at its worst, this part of the psalm asserts that the speaker deserves God's action and God is only keeping covenant. Taken at its best, this unit affirms that obedience to God is crucial for the overcoming of death. . . . When these words are spoken by David (vv. 21–28), they constitute a stunning, incongruous statement. The words intend to be didactic. The episode of Uriah the Hittite (II Sam. 11–12) establishes that David is not blameless and therefore not entitled to the benefits Yahweh gives him. . . . Thus the didactic part of the psalm seems to make a point about moral coherence, but in fact it asserts that God gives gifts and rescues well beyond moral symmetry.

First and Second Samuel. 342–343.

27. "Whoever speaks here can conclude from the deliverance vouchsafed to him that he was 'blameless before him.'The word *tamim* (in Job I.I applied to Job as *tam*) means that all is in order between God and man." Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, 396.

28. Contrariwise, editors of *The Jewish Study Bible* assert that the chiasm is "somewhat different in character [and] theological outlook" from the larger story (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 658. And, representatively, Bruce Birch suggests that "despite this literary structure, these chapters [the chiasm] have been treated primarily as a miscellany without intentional or substantive connection to the preceding books of Samuel. Only recently have voices begun to suggest that these chapters conclude the book of 2 Samuel with a distinctive ideological and theological voice. [Herbert Klement offers the most exhaustive and, to my mind, best perspective.] Scholars have suggested that these chapters taken together make a concluding comment on the story of kingship in Israel and the story of David in particular as that has been narrated in the books of Samuel. . . . My own position on these chapters is similar to that taken by Walter Brueggemann in his recent studies of these chapters. He notes the symmetrical arrangement of narratives in II, 5:1–8, chapters that move David's story from tribal ideology to royal ideology . . . and suggests that these final chapters of 2 Samuel move in the other direction, from a high royal theology back to tribal, covenantal understandings of David's story." *The First and Second Books of Samuel*, in *The New Interpeters Bible: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*, vol. 2 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1998), 345–347.

29. Robert Alter stumbles badly on this matter, I think: "Even a reader looking for unity [of the story as a whole] must concede," Alter opines, "that certain passages [of this story] are not of a piece with the rest. The most salient of these is the coda placed just before the end of the David story (II, 21–24), which comprises material from four different sources, none of them reflecting the style or perspective of the David story proper." *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999), ix–x.

30. A general description of David's rule; more impressive is the manner of David's rewarding the baggage handlers with war spoils along with the warriors, setting a precedent for Israel (I, 31:21–25).

31. David views an angel or messenger of the Lord laying waste to Jerusalem from an interesting geographical perspective, the threshing floor of a Jebusite (a non-Israelite living in Jerusalem, a Jebusite city at one time; II, 24:16). On the peculiar role of the Jebusite here, note three significant references: from Deuteronomy 20:17, "You shall annihilate them—the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites—just as the Lord your God has commanded"; in the closing grim episode of Judges (chs. 19–21), the servant says to his master—the husband of the concubine who will be raped and killed—"let us turn aside to this city of the Jebusites, and spend the night in it" (19:11); the husband refuses, on the grounds that these are foreigners, and so they travel on to meet a grisly fate in an Israelite town belonging to Benjamin. Finally, David

conquers the city of Jebusites, which becomes the city of David, Jerusalem (II, 5:6–10).

32. Robert Alter speaks for almost all scholars: this is a story that includes "the etiological tale explaining how the site of the future temple was acquired. (Although the temple is not explicitly mentioned, this acquisition of an altar site in Jerusalem is clearly placed here to prepare the way for the story of Solomon the temple builder that is to follow)." *The David Story,* 357.

33. This ultimate goal is intimated by David's son Solomon in a prayer offered to God at the highest of all points in Israel's communal life, as recorded in the Hebrew narratives:

> "When a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a distant land because of your name—for they shall hear of your great name, your mighty hand, and your outstretched arm—when a foreigner comes and prays toward this house, then hear in heaven your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you" (I Kings 8:41–43).

34. Lyle Eslinger, for example, who comments on David's desire to build a "house" for the ark, in 2 Samuel 7. "We see, in this interchange between the calculating king [his desire to build the "house" for the ark] and the god who brooks no rival, the same pattern as was played out in the people's request for a human king [back in I Samuel 8]. God took that request as an encroachment against divine prerogatives. As soon as opportunity presented itself, God removed the last vestige of imposition and installed his own replacement. Even then the monarchy is deviant, not something integral to the divine plan for the Israelite. The parallel instructs because it foreshadows Yahweh's method in 2 Samuel 7. First the request is flatly rejected, but then apparently acceded to, albeit with modification. There will be no house for Yahweh to dwell in, but there will be on one for his name and David's seed shall build it." *House of God or House of David,* 96. While certainly this is a "god who brooks no rival" the narrative emphasizes the interplay of human responsibility and God's faithfulness, not the exclusive play of "divine prerogatives." Certainly God is the prime initiator and sustainer in this story, but equally important is the adequate leadership of David versus Saul, and the adequate response of Israel to the covenant (I, 12).

35. The nuances of this covenantal dance of divine and human ruler, each capable of initiative and of response, is caught by Bruce Birch in this comment regarding the concluding scene: "The impression is that God initiated mercy, but that David's response in acknowledging God and confessing his own sin with appropriate acts of ritual piety were necessary to end the threat of judgment completely. The confession is enacted in worship wherein the gift of God's mercy is acknowledged and received. Anything less than authentic worship [the altar] would not restore relationship broken by sin." "*First and Second Samuel,* vol. 2 (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1998), 1382.

CONCLUSION

1. We do not know who wrote *The Odyssey*—who the ascribed "Homer" was, or if, whoever that person was, that person is responsible for the version we read (there are many manuscript versions coming out of the oral versions, and presumably many authors; and modern translations follow various manuscript versions). I use "Homer" conventionally. More on this in just a moment.

2. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957), 6, 7.

3. Ibid., 2, 3.

4. There are two basic words for "nobody," *outis* and *mētis*. *Mētis* can also mean "cunning" (or "plan," "scheme"), but when *mētis* is separated into two words (*mē tis),* the words mean *"no one."* Speaking to Polyphemous, Odysseus alternates between the two words. When the Cyclopes come running at the howling of Polyphemous and ask who is bothering him, Polyphemous responds, *mē tis*—to which the cyclopes answer, in effect*, well if no is bothering you, we can go,* and they do. Again in 455 and 460, Polyphemos talks about *outis*. Polyphemos never gets the puns: *mē tis* (no one) and *metis* (cunning); he uses *outis,* never *mētis.*

5. "The Structures of the Odyssey," in Ian Morris and Barry Powell, eds., *A New Companion to Homer* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 364.

6. Ibid.

7. For example, the conversations between Zeus and Thetis regarding the *Iliad*'s hero, Achilles, in the first and last books (1 and 24), serve as matching bookends to a clear but closed character—closed to any real growth or change in moral character or in self-recognition. "The effect of its formal, geometrical symmetry," as Seth L. Schein points out, "is to impart to the *Iliad* a sense of completion and fulfillment"—but not of discovery and a sense of *what's next*. "The Iliad: Structure and Interpretation," in Ian Morris and Barry Powell, eds., *A New Companion to Homer* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), For a description of the symmetry of the chiasm between books 1–3 and 22–24., see Schein, 345–356. L. Schein, "The Iliad: Structure and Interpretation," in Ian Morris and Barry Powell, eds., *A New Companion to Homer* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 345–346,

8. James S. Ackerman, "Knowing Good and Evil: A Literary Analysis of the Court History in 2 Samuel 9–20 and 1 Kings 1–2." *Journal of Biblical Literature,* 109, 1 (1990), 41.

9. *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, 42.

10. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 21. This generally accepted view of time in early Greek thought may be overstated by many commentators, including Watt. Two scholars in particular are worth noticing for the correctives they can offer. (1) Arnaldo Momigliano, "Time in Ancient Historiography," *History and Theory* 6 (1966): 1–23, and (2), Ludwig Edelstein, *The Idea of Progress in Classical Antiquity* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1967), especially xi–xxxiii and 1–19. I would differ from Auerbach, in fact,

by suggesting that there is a greater sense of time and character in the *Odyssey* than he seems to allow. I think the shift in narrative strategy and implied views of time and character from the *Iliad* to the *Odyssey* is deserving of further study.

11. "God do so to David and more also [in effect—and literallly—*I'll be God-damned*] if by morning I leave so much as one male [literally, *one who pisses against a wall*] of all who belong to [Nabal]" (I, 25:22). See the first section of chapter 3.

12. Abigail's conversation is filled with sweetness and light—and a height-ened moral sense, and ability to judge true righteousness; she seems to have a prophetic sense of Nabal's impending doom. "My lord, do not take seriously this ill-natured fellow, Nabal; for as his name is, so is he; Nabal [fool, scoundrel] is his name, and folly is with him; but I, your servant, did not see the young men of my lord, whom you sent [for provisions]. Now then, my lord, as the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, since the Lord has restrained you from bloodguilt and from taking vengeance with your own hand, now let your enemies and those who seek to do evil to my lord be like Nabal. And now let this present that your servant has brought to my lord be given to the young men who follow my lord. Please forgive the trespass of your servant; for the Lord will certainly make my lord a sure house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the Lord; and evil shall not be found in you so long as you live" (I, 25:25–28).

13. In the echoing scene of sparing the king, David holds forth: "'Here is the spear, O king! Let one of the young men come over and get it. The Lord rewards everyone for his righteousness and his faithfulness; for the Lord gave you into my hand today, but I would not raise my hand against the Lord's anointed. As your life was precious today in my sight, so may my life be precious in the sight of the Lord, and may he rescue me from all tribulation.' Then Saul said to David, 'Blessed be you, my son David! You will do many things and will succeed in them.' So David went his way, and Saul returned to his place" (I, 26:17–25).

14. David will go on to commit great evil (see chs. 5–9).

15. Even evil spirits are under the sway of this God, and are visited on mortals by none other than this God—on Saul, for example.

16. God is shown changing in allegiance to charismatic judges for the occasion—with the divine as ultimate and conspicuous ruler—to the rule of kings, behind which God gets fully on board, with a proviso : God has promised Eli an everlasting house, but changes the divine mind because Eli does wrong by his children; God has chosen Saul as king, but changes direction by having David anointed—because of Saul's wrongdoing, his poor handling of fear.

17. Though Genesis might have been committed to scrolls later than was the story in Samuel and Kings: the note in I Kings 8:41–43, then, would have been part of a thought-world that influenced Gen. 12:3, rather than the other way around.

18. Joel Rosenberg captures this sense nicely. "YHWH's words [a house *forever*] to Eli in [I] 2:30 reveal a divinely centered perspective on the role of the familial 'houses' of human beings in YHWH's plan, which we may take as fundamental to the unfolding story of the books of Samuel and Kings: 'Truly, I had said, "Your house and your father's house will walk before me forever," but now, says YHWH, "far be it from me! Rather, I shall honor those who honor me, and they who scorn me shall be

dishonored!"' (cf. Genesis 12:3, Exodus 33:19). Every presiding house begins with the *divine* (!) hope of perpetual divine favor, yet it is the behavior of that house's members that ultimately determines *how* perpetual its preeminence will be." *King and Kin: Political Allegory in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 114–115.

19. I Kings 8:41–43; Gen. 12:3.

20. In the early phase of the newly united kingdom, for example, we have David making sure of his support and financial tribute: he slaughters two-thirds of the Moabites in a calculating and humiliating manner, along with other brutal conquests—with, no less, the repeated interjection by the narrator, "The Lord gave victory to David wherever he went (II, 8:6, 14). In a late phase of Israel's well-being, the most satisfactory communal good in Israel's recorded history, we hear King Solomon declare largesse for all foreigners (I Kings 8:41–43), with Gen. 12:3 formulating the premise of Israel's being chosen: to bring blessing to all peoples.

21. David's loyalty to foreigners who are incorporated into his troops, and their loyalty to him—and his desire that they experience Yahweh's steadfast love—is caught in a moving scene, as already seen.

> The king left, followed by all the people; and they stopped at the last house. All his officials passed by him; and all the Cherethites, and all the Pelethites, and all the six hundred Gittites who had followed him from Gath [Goliath's people!], passed on before the king. Then the king said to Ittai the Gittite, 'Why are you also coming with us? Go back, and stay with the king; for you are a foreigner, and also an exile from your home. You came only yesterday, and shall I today make you wander about with us, while I go wherever I can? Go back, and take your kinsfolk with you; and may the LORD show steadfast love and faithfulness to you.' But Ittai answered the king, 'As the Lord lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether for death or for life, there also your servant will be.' David said to Ittai, 'Go then, march on.' So Ittai the Gittite marched on, with all his men and all the little ones who were with him. The whole country wept aloud as all the people passed by; the king crossed the Wadi Kidron, and all the people moved on toward the wilderness. (II, 15:17–23)

22. Directly following the recording of David's subjugation of other peoples cited in note 27, the narrator summarizes David's rule: "David administered justice and equity to all his people" (II, 8:15).

23. Muted in David's story (as suggested in note 22 here), the goal of God expressed in Genesis—that through Israel all the families of earth be blessed (12:3)—surfaces only when the house of David is firmly established under David's son Solomon. In a moment we will hear King Solomon's prayer concerning other peoples. David's story seems to indicate that the divine hands are quite full in simply assisting Israel itself to come together, to enjoy the *shalom* of communal well-being.

24. For example, in the long concluding psalm: "You deliver a humble people, / but your eyes are upon the haughty to bring them down" (II, 22:28); the thought

permeates the Hannah's poem (I, 2:2–10), which David's poem echoes (see pattern-guide for ch. 8).

25. Auerbach, *Mimesis,* 7 (quoted earlier).

26. The "multiple introductions" are derived, certainly, from varying sources, as suggested throughout this study. The genius of the biblical writer, of course, is to weave these into a coherent, convincing, and unified whole, presenting the audience with various aspects of David's character that will emerge.

27. It should be remembered here that whenever I make reference to "God" I am talking about this story's God, the character of God as represented in the story of David.

28. As noted by Auerbach, mentioned earlier.

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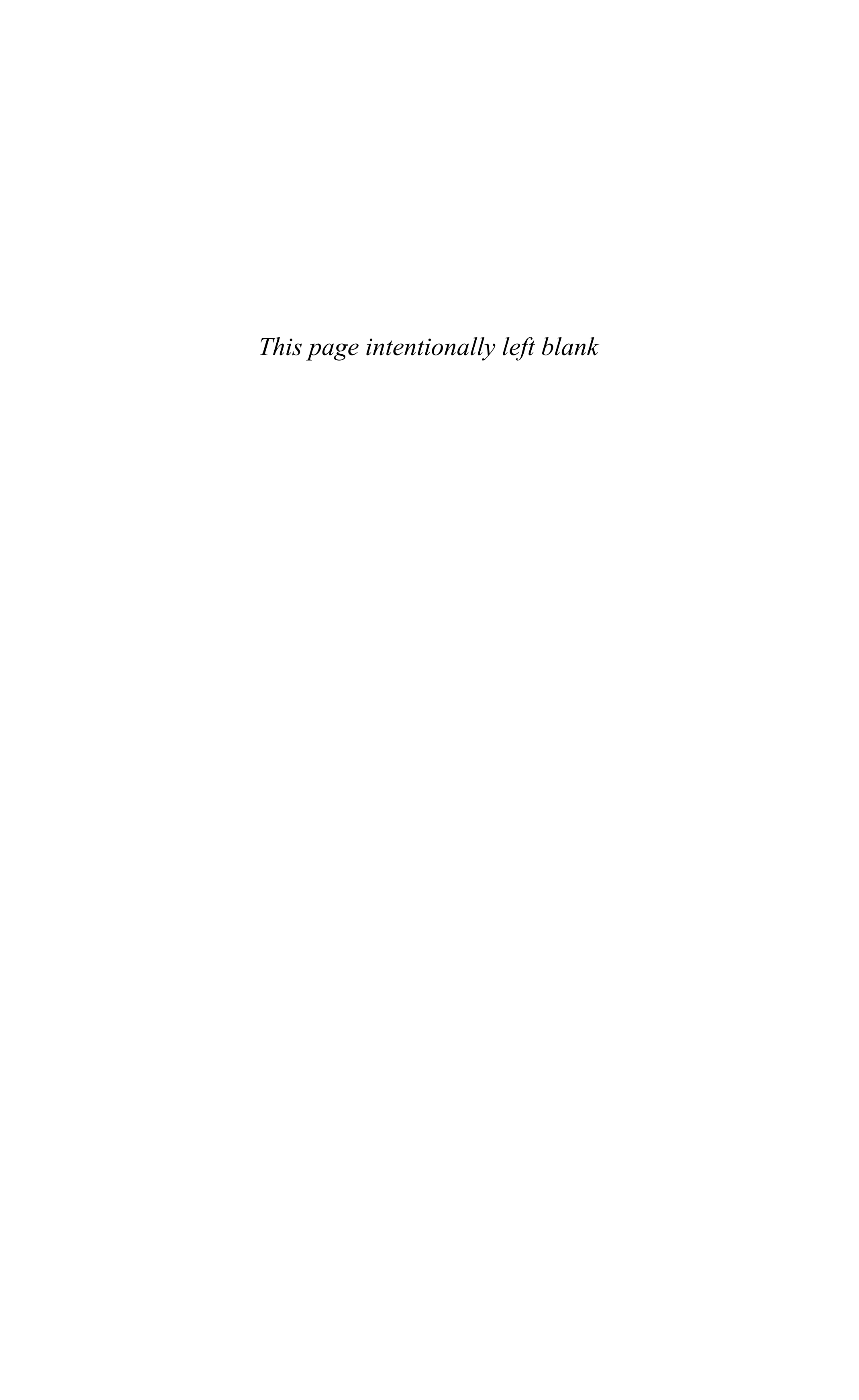
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